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INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH  
Perspectives on the Plural Nationspace  
Guest Editor: Arunima Ray

## INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

### Perspectives on the Plural Nationspace

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The body of work called Indian Writing in English which had its inception under the sign of colonialism has proved to be both exciting and powerful down the years. Its phenomenal proliferation in terms of production and that too of high artistic excellence has earned it a distinct identity of its own. However, for this, it had to traverse varied intellectual terrains and phases of development and decolonization. What made it possible was indeed the spectacular rise of a whole line of talented and illustrious writers who have made original use of the English language and artistic forms, suiting their own cultural needs. They have dominated the literary scene nationally and internationally, winning the most coveted awards and recognition and proving to be the producers of a rich postcolonial discursivity as well.

The English language, which was once introduced in India by the British to create a class of interpreters for administrative purposes, has been ultimately appropriated by the so-called “natives”, making it their own, a phenomenon that points out the postcolonial need of reconfiguring and reorienting a colonial legacy. It has proved to be a means of striking back to the centre and despite the charge that Indian Writing in English comes from the privileged English-speaking elite, there is no denying the fact that this very literature has given a powerful representation to the “Other” of the society who remained subjugated and inarticulate under hierarchies of caste, class, culture, gender, race, ethnicity, centre, margin, global, local, nation, trans-nation, and so on. In addressing such issues, Indian Writing in English has proved to be dynamic, radical, subversive, and pan-Indian in respect of representation and reception. In this context it is important to note that a lot of Bhasha literatures also is now getting translated into English. This special Issue of the Journal addresses these varied issues and aspects of Indian Writing in English in a bid to shed new light on them through the many articles published here.

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Indian Writing in English:  
Perspectives on the Plural Nationspace  
Guest Editor: Arunima Ray

Dedicated to the Loving Memory of  
MANOJ DAS (1934-2021)



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## A Prefatory Note

It would be just stating a fact that Indian Writing in English is now a phenomenon to reckon with and that it enjoys a global readership and a wide critical appreciation. We are happy to mention that there was a huge response to our call for papers and in our choice of papers we kept ourselves open for as much variety as possible so far as themes and issues are concerned. This Issue includes essays on individual writers like Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Bapsi Sidhwa, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Mulk Raj Anand, and so on. These have expectedly shed fresh light and added new insights by providing new perspectives on the authors. Besides, there are essays that focus on other comparatively new areas and themes, for example, the Kashmiri Anglo-phone Resistance literature, North-East Writing in English, Writings of the Muslim Women Novelists, Tribes in Transition, South Asian Diaspora Poetry, Woman and Anti-fascist Resistance, Secularism, Same-Sex Love, and so on. Dalit literature has already occupied a niche in contemporary Indian Writings. It is represented through some perceptive discussions of the works of Meena Kandasamy. All in all, the Issue tried to present in its limited space a spectrum of varied perspectives, issues, poetics and politics of academic interest on contemporary Indian Writing in English. As stated above, we received a huge number of papers on various areas and topics. Many of the papers were otherwise worth publishing but could not be accommodated due to lack of space. We sincerely regret our inability on that account. We thank all our contributors to this issue. We hope that the readers and scholars interested in the Journal and the subject it deals with would find the Issue intellectually enjoyable and valuable.

**Arunima Ray**

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## Introduction

ARUNIMA RAY

---

*The Travels of Dean Mohammed* (1794) was perhaps the first book which was published and written in English. So the History of Indian Writing in English goes back more than 200 years. While that is a pretty long one for a colonized country for which this is a foreign language, the journey has been no less a contentious and a chequered one. The debates and discussions about the validity of writing in a language which is not one's own have come up time and again and supporters of Indian Writing in English have had to come to its defense over and over again through the decades. Nonetheless, the English language and literature have been a source of great attraction for our writers. No wonder, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya wrote his first novel in English and Michael Madhusudan Dutt's love for the English Language as well as his first foray into it is well known. Calcutta having been the capital of the British in India before Delhi, the colonial influence both in terms of administration and education had started there. The Hindu college, known later as the Presidency College and today as Presidency University is the oldest in South East Asia and was started by the British. Hence, the first books written in English and the formation of the first English educated middleclass intelligentsia have happened there. Yet, the anxiety and shame of writing in the language of the colonial master was always there. Along with the questions of class and privilege, the questions of inauthenticity and insincerity of writing in a foreign language by Indian English Writers had also cropped up. And of course, whenever the questions of nationalism and loyalty had come up in the country, the language question also invariably followed. In different ways and at different times, the language question had surfaced and resurfaced time and again - during the heady days of the national movement and again in the in the 60s and the 90s *vis-à-vis* the claims of Hindi and other regional languages - and it keeps coming up in varied other forms. And each time, Indian Writers in English and its other users would have to defend themselves. However, today, in spite of criticisms and a controversial status, Indian Writing in English has proved undoubtedly that it has come to stay and that too very prominently. With India churning out an unprecedented number of books by Indian English Writers, especially the novelists, and the Indian writers dominating the international award scenes, Indian Writing in English has not only made a mark for itself, but has also made a great contribution to literature in general. The other scenario that has come to be stable is that of English being accepted as one of our national official languages. This points to the postcolonial phenomenon of necessarily abrogating and appropriating part of what had happened to be our colonial legacies.

The debates on language came up in various ways. An important one is the debate on language in the Parliament when the Official Language Bill of 1963 was placed. Nehru was always a strong advocate of English and wanted to retain English as the official language along with Hindi. He thought that English is a dynamic language and that our languages would benefit greatly in contact with English. He fought tooth and nail for the



English language and strongly put forth these arguments in the Parliament. This reminds one of Tagore who also never really wanted an East-West divide and was always for cultural exchanges and syncretism and hence a controversial figure during the national movement. And today English still remains the official language along with Hindi except for Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim which have only English as their official language. Even though the language was retained, it did not mean that Indian Writing in English was not seen with skepticism. Buddhadeva Bose's famous denouncement of English as a chosen language for creative output is well known. The debate continued unabated even in the 90s with the various "nativist" proponents expressing strong opinions about the role of English in impoverishing the mother tongues. Namade's name comes to mind in this context. However, after decades of debates and discussions, we have now come to a point where we have attained the maturity to accept and understand that English may also be considered as one of the Indian Languages. What has strengthened this postcolonial conviction was the steady process of appropriation of the English language during the post-independence decades. If nationalism itself was a barrier to begin with, then it was also felt as a necessity for the much-needed national integration as well as transnational transactions. With the spread of education in the country, parallelly there was an exponential growth of English-medium schools and colleges leading to an increasing importance of English as a language of communication and creativity in the urban centres of the country. No wonder, a crop of talented creative writers writing in English soon came up changing the educational scenario altogether in terms of future possibilities and prospects. The discursive situation too was soon ripe for a postnational and postcolonial intervention favouring the Indian English Writers to narrate the nation and transnation as radically as possible.

It can be said that it all began with Macaulay's "Minute on Education" of 1835, followed by Lord Bentinck's English Education Act of the same year which gave a formal status to the teaching of English literature and sciences to the indigenous people. Macaulay's goal was well known as he famously said that his aim was the creation of "a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect" (quoted in Gopal 16). This new English educated bilingual native, the Bengali "bhadralok" or "respectable folk" which would go on to play a very important role in the political scenario of India later on, during the independence movement, was already in the making for some time now. With the formal introduction of English, this class would emerge as a force to reckon with and would soon usher in the Bengal Renaissance. Influential Bengali thinkers and reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy already were supporters of English Education and welcomed it enthusiastically with the conviction that Indians would greatly benefit from it. Rammohan Roy said in 1823 that "the Sanskrit system of education would best be calculated to keep this country in darkness" (Mehrotra 5). Henry Derozio tried to nourish the minds of his young students at the Hindu college by introducing them to new concepts and ideas – many of which were too radical for the time. He was an advocate of rationalism and skepticism. He started a movement called The Young Bengal Movement, a strand of Bengal Renaissance. With Macaulay's Minute, colonial education was formally introduced in India but the whole issue was a matter of great debate. One important word of caution came from one of the earliest directors of East India Company, who said, "we [have] just lost America because of our folly, in having allowed the establishment of schools and colleges...I(t) would not do for us to

repeat the same act of folly in regard to India" (Mehrotra 5). Yet, the "folly" would be repeated and it is not unknown the turn that history had taken in due course. The leaders of our anti-colonial movement would be none other than this very class, the go-between, the class that Macaulay wanted to create for political expediency and smoother administration of the British Government. The colonial master would soon introduce this class to the radical ideas of liberalism, equality and rationality and in an interesting turn of irony would themselves inspire them to fight colonialism. No wonder, Partha Chatterjee calls nineteenth-century nationalism a derivative discourse. These very ideas also gave birth to the Bengal Renaissance and our leaders and thinkers "attempted to reinterpret Hindu tradition to align it with their own understanding of the meaning of modernity and progress. This entailed a rewriting of Indian history that argued that an original monotheistic Hinduism had been corrupted into polytheistic idolatry and superstition" (Gopal 18). Mehrotra in his book *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English* (2008) refers to Kylas Chunder Dutt's "A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945" (1835). It is about an imaginary account of an armed uprising against the British. Interestingly and ironically the insurgents were the middleclass educated Indians who were introduced to colonial education.

So the postcolonial identity, postcolonial Literature and even Indian Writing in English are all complex and hybrid contexts and cannot be understood in neat binaries of East and West, English and vernacular or nativism and cosmopolitanism. Postcolonial India has appropriated the language of the colonizer and made it its own. However, this too came with its resultant complex political, social and economic problems. While it is a known fact that English is a language of social mobility, more accessible to the affluent living in the metropolis today, it is also the English education or colonial education that undoubtedly questioned various oppressive hierarchies in the Indian society at that time. In fact, literature coming from the west probably even appeared liberatory to many of our own nationalist leaders. As I have already mentioned above, Bengal renaissance which had at its heart rationalism and liberalism were learnt from the colonizer by our bilingual natives. In other words, east or west, global or local, Indian Language or English - all of these cannot be understood simplistically as binary oppositions. The English speaking middle class also evolved from a complex mix of colonialism and nationalism. These complexities are forgotten by those who make denunciatory remarks about writing in a foreign language.

However, what staunch nativist supporters forget is that Indian Literature itself is also not a homogenous entity and that there are hierarchies even within the native languages. One may be reminded of Hindi and its relationship with the southern and other parts of the country. In the same manner, Indian writing in English is also a heterogeneous body of work. As a matter of fact, even the "English" in the Indian Writing in English remains a fluid concept depending on the cultural difference from which it comes and which it addresses back. While the "English" that emerges from the writings of a writer from the southern part of India may offer a flavour of its own culture, it may be differently oriented in the case of a Bengali writer or for that matter one from the North-Eastern part of the country writing in English. Easterine Kire in one of her interviews once called her English, Naga English and Amit Chaudhuri's novels set in Kolkata would give a perfect idea about how a Bengali writer would represent the language. In *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin talk of this refashioning of English that was happening in the colonies. McLeod refers to it as follows:

This refashioning worked in several ways... writers were creating new 'englishes' (the lack capital E is deliberate) through various strategies: inserting untranslatable words into their texts; by glossing seemingly obscure terms; by refusing to follow standard English syntax and using structures derived from other languages; of incorporating many different creolized versions of English into their texts. Each of these strategies was demonstrated operating in a variety of postcolonial texts, and in each the emphasis was on the writers' attempt to subvert and refashion standard English into various new forms of 'english', as a way of jettisoning the colonialist values which standard English housed. (McLeod 26)

R.K Narayan's opinion about the English language which he calls "Bharat English" in the 30s is the most apt in this context, though Raja Rao's Foreword to *Kanthapura* is more often quoted:

The time has come for us to consider seriously the question of a Bharat [i.e. Indian, 'Bharat' being the indigenous name for India] brand of English... Now it is time for it to come to the dusty street, the marketplace and under the banyan tree. I am not considering a mongrelisation of language... Bharat English will respect the rule of law and maintain the dignity of grammar, but still have a *swadeshi* [native] stamp about it, like the Madras handloom or check [sic] shirt or the Tirupati doll. (Narayan quoted in Krishna Sen 129)

Indeed, Narayan's "Bharat English" succinctly sums up the "englishes" that have emerged from the colonies - a result of gradual conscious and unconscious assimilation. Narayan was pretty conscious of the language he was using. His novels are peopled with indigenous and local figures, especially commonplace Tamilians who are superstitious, worshipped local gods, believed in spirits etc. He suited his language to represent them. In his essay "A literary Alchemy", he makes another important observation. He says:

Passing from literature to language, 'Indian English' is often mentioned with some amount of contempt and patronage, but is a legitimate development and needs no apology. We have fostered the language for over a century and we are entitled to bring it in line with our own habits of thought and idiom. Americans have adapted the language to suit their native mood and speech without feeling apologetic, and have achieved directness and unambiguity in expression (Narayan quoted in Krishna Sen 130)

This exactly is the act of appropriation of the colonizer's language which is also theorized in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). This new "English" is different from the one at the centre and there is an unbridgeable gap between the two and, as John McLeod has it, this gap is positive because new identities are created through this difference:

The new 'english' of the colonized place was ultimately, irredeemably different from the centre, separated by an unbridgeable gap... The new 'english' could not be converted into standard English because they have surpassed its limits, broken its rules. As a consequence of this irredeemable difference, new values, identities and value-systems were expressed and old colonial values whole heartedly rejected. (26)

The English language was not the only thing that the British introduced to the colonies like India. Indians were also introduced to various literary styles of the British as well. So even when the writers were writing in vernacular, they adopted the style of the British. Krishna Sen says:

What is interesting is that through the interface with English the vernaculars themselves came to be enriched with genres hitherto unrepresented in Sanskrit or any of the native literatures- verse forms such as the sonnet and the ode, subjective narratives like the essay

and the autobiography (signaling 'the birth of the subject') and most significantly the major changes agitating traditional social formations, the novel. (127)

India was introduced to prose and prose fiction, a form unknown to Indians and as a result the 1840s saw a proliferation of newspapers especially in Bengali, Marathi and Hindi. Examples of some such newspapers are *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, *Digdarshan*, *Prabhakar*, *Vartaman Tarangini*, and so on. As is known, the newspapers played a very important role in the anti-colonial movement of the country. The newspapers brought the common people together, infused the feelings of patriotism in them and played a major role in spreading awareness. As regards our vernacular literatures, even though they were written in regional vernacular languages, the influence of English literature on them was undeniable. Whether it is Rangalal Banerjee who wrote *Padmini Upakhyay* (1858) or Madhusudan Dutt who introduced the blank verse in Bengali or Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya who wrote the first English novel, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) or O Chandu Menon who wrote in Malayalam, most of the writers were influenced by European literature in general and English literature in particular. Disraeli's *Henrietta Temple* (1837) influenced O Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1889). So even when many of our writers wrote their novels in their vernacular languages, the form, the style and the content were very much influenced by the European and British writers and the new forms introduced by them. Postcolonialism acknowledges this cultural exchange, making the question of hybridity almost a condition of possibility.

English today is a postcolonial entity and a postcolonial tool and Indian Writing in English which has evolved over the last two hundred years expresses our multicultural and hybrid nationspace the best because English as Amit Chaudhuri very forcefully argues is the representation of this hybridity itself. We have to move beyond simplistic understanding of what is quintessentially 'native' and think of Indian Writing in English as Native too. John McLeod in talking of literatures emerging from the colonies says how the shift from being Commonwealth Literature to Postcolonial Literature is significant because we have moved "towards a more politicized approach which analyzed texts primarily within historical and geographical contexts...their 'local' concerns were fundamental to their meanings..." (McLeod 27). Indian Writing in English is representative of the nation and its fragments, the centre and its margins, women, gender, sexuality, diasporic identities and the subaltern. The essays in this Special Issue of the Journal modestly hope to offer some perspectives on this very plural nationspace.

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# Nailing Gandhi for Cracking India in Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* and Raj Gill's *The Rape*

BEERENDRA PANDEY

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**Abstract:** This article makes a comparative analysis of two canonical Indian English Partition novels—Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* and Raj Gill's *The Rape*. It assumes that insofar as both the novels, configured after right wing history, look upon Mahatma Gandhi's doctrine of non-violence as perverted in the face of what they see as Islamic terror, they enunciate a view at odds with the nationalistic history of Partition and evoke an affect of revenge against the Muslims. It posits that while Malgonkar conspicuously encapsulates the Hindutva view of Partition through an unambiguous dramatization of an intense dialectic between violence and non-violence, and between V. D. Savarkar and Mahatma Gandhi to dexterously develop the theme of revenge, Gill bungles the transmutation since he dubiously hovers between a right-wing Khalsa view that calls for revenge and conversely a tempered, secular line accentuating forgiveness.

**Keywords:** Indian English Partition novel, Manohar Malgonkar, *A Bend in the Ganges*, Raj Gill, *The Rape*, right-wing history, Gandhi, non-violence, Islamic terror, nationalistic history of Partition, revenge, Hindutva view of Partition

R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and Balachandra Rajan's *The Dark Dancer* (1958) draw on the nationalist history of modern India. Like it, they elide the violence of Partition riots by crediting India's Independence largely to the non-violent campaign of the Indian National Congress under the charismatic leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. However, V. D. Savarkar's *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History* attributes the success of the watershed event to a number of factors, most prominently the violent tactics of the underground elements including those led by the fire-brand leader, Subhas Chandra Bose (Savarkar 470-71). This book makes the violence of 1946-47 the subject, the object, the instrument and purpose of the Partition-marred Independence. Whereas in this view the privileging of the Muslims' barbarity on the Hindus and Sikhs becomes the *raison d'être* for revenge, Gandhi—the votary of non-violence—turns out to be a “‘murderer’ and ‘a traitor’” (editorials of *The Outlook* in 1947 qtd. in Sukeshi Kamra 94). The call for Muslim blood receives a great deal of emphasis in *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) and *The Rape* (1974), both of which “do not cast Hindu-Muslim history in a roseate glow imparted to it by the romantic idealists/nationalist[s]” (Anup Beniwal 182) but dramatize the right-wing perceptions of Partition—the former coloured by Hindutva and the latter by Sikh ethno-nationalism.

This essay argues that, like the right-wing history which pins the blame of Partition on Gandhi, Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) and Gill's *The Rape* (1974) nail the Mahatma for cracking India in 1947. It also shows that even as *A Bend in the Ganges* dialectically encapsulates the Hindutva view of Partition and conspicuously calls for

Muslim blood but still turns out to be a classy masterwork, *The Rape* hesitantly hovers between a right-wing clamour for revenge and, conversely, a secular line of forgiveness to end up as a structurally flawed artwork. Gill's tendency to draw on the language of Sikh ethno-nationalist historiography in the midst of justifying the Sikhs' atrocities on the Muslims only worsens his use of the prose of otherness, making *The Rape* a literary disaster. Whereas his effort to force a balance backfires, Malgonkar's unambiguousness helps him succeed as a novelist.

It is not for nothing that the two renowned historians of Indian English literature—K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar and M. K. Naik—do not even mention Raj Gill or *The Rape* in their books on the history of Indian English literature. But the pair of K. K. Sharma and B. K. Johri not only includes *The Rape* in the canon of Indian English Partition Literature but also rules that “the novel is a brilliant exploration of the theme of Partition. It not only narrates a touching tale of the times of Partition, but also presents some unforgettable scenes and sights of the great historic event artistically” (135). N. S. Gundur, likewise, takes the novel as an “authentic” rendering of “history” (155) but finds the novel “melodramatic” and its politics as not having been “transformed into an art form successfully” (154). Similarly, Beniwal too finds the narrative of *The Rape* not only “melodramatic at many places” (136) but also its rendition of the author's “anger” as “[un]sublimate[d]” (136). Although both Beniwal and Gundur mete out a comprehensive treatment to the novel, they do not hold it in high esteem, as does the duo of K. K. Sharma and B. K. Johri.

Like *The Rape*, *A Bend in the Ganges* has received mixed reception from critics. According to Saros Cowasjee, E. M. Forster chose it as the best novel of 1964 (90) but, as reported by Shyam Asnani, Quarrrtualian Hyder summarily dismissed it as a novel presenting “a ludicrous and contemptuous image of our [Indians'] Freedom Movement” (Asnani 71). Another renowned novelist, Khushwant Singh, however, hailed it as a model “of good writing by Indian writers writing today” (qtd. in Amarnath Dwivedi 68). At the heart of the sharp critical differences found in the novel's critical reception lies Malgonkar's representation of Gandhian non-violence. Critics anticipating the usual deification of Gandhi get disappointed at finding the novel's delineation of the “operation” of the “ideology of non-violence” on human beings as unsavoury (G. S. Amur 109)—a representation for which pro-Gandhian critics object to the novelist's objectivity: Asnani, for example, finds Malgonkar's belittling of non-violence as “being biased and influenced by his own [Hindutva] predilections” (91). Similarly, Sudha Sundaram points to the novelist's lack of objectivity in “show[ing] the failure of non-violence in Punjab, but not its success in Bengal largely due to Gandhi's presence” (37). N. S. Pradhan goes to the extent of chiding K. K. Sharma for interpreting *A Bend in the Ganges* as suggesting Gandhi's culpability in Partition as “a rather inept version of . . . [the] view” that rejection of the Gandhian concept of non-violence is the theme of the novel (149). While Malgonkar's indictment of Gandhian non-violence has raised some critics' hackles, it has gone down quite well among those who have approached the novel with an open mind. R. S. Singh, for example, lauds Malgonkar for “correct[ing] a lop-sided view of the history of the freedom struggle” (129). A. Padmanabhavan, hails the deviation from the norm—the courage to interrogate the Gandhian non-violence on the one hand and to spotlight the Terrorist Movement of the 1930s on the other hand—as the novelist's “unique distinction” (4). While including *A Bend in the Ganges* in the canon of Indian English fiction, Iyengar seizes the novel's deviation as “the shame and agony of the partition . . . the defeat of the hour of freedom” (431). D.

S. Rao, in a recent article praises the novelist's "meticulous artistry" of "raising" the novel's veering towards the need for "revenge" to "epiphanic levels" (108).

The deviation seems to have been actuated by Malgonkar's belief in the philosophy of the ideologue of Hindutva, V. D. Savarkar whose influence in the writing of *A Bend in the Ganges* does not seem far-fetched if one considers Malgonkar's choice of the title which refers to an episode in *The Ramayana* in which Ram, Laxaman and Sita pause at a bend in the Ganges to look back at the land of Ayodhya they were leaving (Iyengar 431). Apart from the reference to the *Ramayana*, some critics zero in on the constant presence of Lord Shiva inspiring revenge in the narrative (C. M. Mohan Rao 74; S. Z. H. Abidi 78). These critical observations reinforce the Hindutva angle of the novel. According to Bindu Puri, the novel carries an overtone of Savarkar's total disapproval of "the Gandhian reading of ancient Hindu texts and consequent understanding of the Hindu religion as revolving around *ahimsa*, *satya* and God" (155). Savarkar's avowal of Hindutva, which came as a rebuttal of the Gandhian ideology, constructs "a Hindu-centric conception of the Indian identity. That identity draw [. . . s] heavily from images of courage and valour in the ancient Hindu texts to build up a militant Hindu persona capable of facing the colonizer on violent terms" (Savarkar 156). Unlike the Gandhian interpretation of Hindu epics in terms of forgiveness and non-violence, epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, in Savarkar's interpretation, promote "virtues such as honour, dignity, heroic courage; and values such as war fought in a just cause and even terrible violence in the pursuit of 'rightful,' restorative vengeance" (162). For Savarkar, justice for the Hindus lies in redressing the balance—the wrongs suffered at the hands of the aliens whether the British or the Muslims. The reference to the episode of *The Ramayana* and the use of the Shiva symbol in *A Bend in the Ganges* should be seen as legitimizing the notion of taking arms for righteousness or *dharma*. G. S. Amur, however, takes the text's validity of the notions of violence and revenge as one of its "blemishes" (121), but his explanation turns out to be useful in understanding Malgonkar's use of Savarkar's "*Black Waters (Kale Pani)*," particularly "details like the secret khobri that Ghasita the Ramoshi . . . the flogging to which Debi Dayal is subjected" and the "blueprint for the Debi Dayal-Sundari-Gian relationship in the Dolkati-Malati-Kishan relationship" in *A Bend in the Ganges* (117). The use of Savarkar as pointed by Amur and the references to *The Ramayana* and Lord Shiva in a novel which has been almost unanimously interpreted as dramatizing the validity of violence and revenge bear out the influence of Savarkarism on Malgonkar who, to quote Asha Kaushik, places Gandhism "in a comparative context" in *A Bend in the Ganges*—right at the center of the debate between Gandhi and Savarkar (44).

That Malgonkar subjects the much-vaunted Gandhian doctrine of non-violence to a critical scrutiny becomes ostensible even from the "Author's Note," which he places before the narrative proper gets underway, and wherein he foregrounds his awareness of "the paradoxical and ironic turn" of the "Gandhian creed of non-violence" (J. Lalitha 36):

What was achieved through non-violence, brought with it one of the bloodiest upheavals of history: twelve million people had to flee, leaving their homes; nearly half a million were killed; over a hundred thousand women, young and old, were abducted, raped, mutilated" (Malgonkar, "A Bend").

The cataloguing of the violence-related dynamic verbs here lends a serrated edge to the irony of the triumph of non-violence. In the narrative proper, Malgonkar further undercuts the non-violent movement. He identifies the relentless pressure exerted by the terrorists and the British reverses in the Second World War, rather than the Gandhian non-violent

campaign, as being the primary contributory factors to the attainment of freedom. The long Gandhi quotation in which the Mahatma himself doubts the efficacy of non-violence and which is placed before the "Author's Note" sets the mood of the novel: "What if, when the fury bursts, not a man, woman, or child is safe and every man's hand is raised against the neighbor?" The epigraph, manifesting Gandhi's self-doubt and self-questioning, sets the tone of the ineffectiveness of non-violence. Malgonkar, however, dramatizes the ineffectualness in a comparative way amidst the bloody backdrop of the Partition violence; his *tour de force* lies in interweaving an intense dialectic between non-violence and violence in the narrative-fabric of *A Bend in the Ganges*.

Malgonkar introduces the dialectic early on in Gian Talwar's encounter with Shafi masquerading as a Sikh and known by the pseudo name of Singh. Gian, attracted by Gandhi's non-violent campaign, wears *khaddar*, the rough homespun clothes of Indian peasants to proclaim himself as a Gandhian soldier committed to the cause of freedom. The dialectic is set into motion as soon as Singh startles Gian by accusing Gandhi of being "the enemy of India's national aspirations" (11). If for Gian a patriot is only one who is a follower of Mahatma Gandhi, for Singh even a non-Gandhian like himself qualifies as a patriot. If Gandhi, to Gian, is "like a god" who "alone can lead us to victory . . . . Through non-violence" (12), to Singh the Mahatma is a hypnotist who has done incalculable harm with "his hypnotic power [because there is not even] a single instance in history, of just one country which has been able to shake off foreign rule without resorting to war, to violence" (12). If Singh takes non-violence as "the philosophy of sheep, a creed of cowards" (12), Gian takes it as "the noblest of creeds . . . [which] takes greater courage; non-violence is not for the weak" (13). Debi Dayal, like Singh, believes that non-violence is a creed for the cowards. However, after his varied experiences and especially his perception of the mounting communal violence on the eve of Independence, he develops self-doubt. When he learns from Basu of the violence unleashed by the Muslim League, he tells the terrorist-turned-Hindu Mahasabha activist that "non-violence is perhaps the only answer" to the on-going communal madness (284). The activist, however, dismisses non-violence scornfully as: "merely a pious thought, a dream of a philosopher" (284). To Basu, the reality of the communal killings leaves no room for non-violence to succeed in such a surcharged atmosphere of somebody throwing "acid at the girl you loved" (285). He believes that recourse to non-violence at this time of Muslim fury will once again make the Hindus a slave race within weeks of deliverance from the British rule. Non-violence, according to him, is an ineffective weapon against "brute force," as that of "Hitler" (285). Basu believes that the popularity of non-violence among the Hindus will put them at the receiving end of the Hindu-Muslim riots: "More women will be raped, abducted, children slaughtered, because their men will have been made incapable of standing up for themselves" (286). In a world of mounting violence Basu sees Gandhi's reliance on non-violence and his fast-unto-death sit-ins in Bengal and Bihar as failing to avert the bloody Partition.

Basu's denunciation of the principle of Gandhian non-violence, which Dayanand James identifies with the point of view "of the violent revolutionaries or terrorists who had no faith in the Gandhian technique of nonviolence" looks logical (123). This perspective, which dialectically challenges the nationalistic position, recalls Savarkar's censure "of the doctrine of absolute non-violence not because we are less saintly, but because we are more sensible!" (Keer qtd. in Jyoti Trehan 109). Basu's dismissal of Gandhian non-violence echoes Malgonkar's own stance, for even in *The Men Who Killed Gandhi* which privileges



the perspective of the assassins, he foregrounds the Gandhian doctrine at the time of the naked dance of communal violence as being not only “a form of perversity” but also “the action of a saint bent on martyring his flock in a grand gesture of idealism” (Malgonkar, “The Men” 17-18). Malgonkar’s carping critique here recalls Hindutva criticism of Gandhian non-violence as undermining the Hindu hold on India and bringing shame to the Hindu Nation.

Malgonkar’s sharp tone and worldview in *A Bend in the Ganges* stem from Savarkar’s sophisticated discourse of Hindutva as found in his writings and speeches including *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*, wherein the Hindu ideologue’s political perspective, which approximates to the stereotyped notions of the impotent Hindu “Self” and the hyper-sexual, hyper-aggressive Muslim “Other,” finds virtue as a perversion, which is shown to have been injurious to the Hindu nation on numerous occasions. In this view, even the chivalrous attitude of Hindu heroes like Chattrapati Shivaji and Chimaji Appa to the daughter-in-law of the Muslim governor of Kalyan and the wife of the Portuguese governor of Bassein is condemned as a perversion because it did not permit a tit for tat action, that is, it did not allow them to avenge

the unutterable atrocities and oppression and outrage committed on us by the Sultans and Muslim noblemen and thousands of others, big and small. Let those Sultans and their peers take a fright that in the event of a Hindu victory our molestation and detestable lot shall be avenged on the Muslim women. (Savarkar 179)

Besides the Hindu attitude of chivalry to womenfolk, Savarkar also takes Hindus’ tolerance as perverted virtue. In this connection, Purushottam Agarwal comments, “the self-image of a tolerant Hindu is arbitrarily constituted and then, it is contrasted with the ferociously intolerant ‘Other’ and the tolerant Hindu is invited to become equally ferocious” (47-48). It is Savarkar’s philosophy of paying the Muslims back in the same coin, which is at odds with the political thrust of the Congress that makes him denounce the Congress, Gandhi and non-violence. Agarwal’s citation of Savarkar’s hagiographer Dhananjaya Keer’s following remark throws further light on the Hindu ideologue’s call for Hindu revenge of the Muslim atrocities in the context of the Partition violence: “He (Savarkar) said that Pakistan’s inhuman and barbarous acts such as kidnapping and raping Indian women would not be stopped unless Pakistan was given tit for tat [, which alone would make it appreciate] ‘the horrors of those brutalities’” (Keer qtd. in Agarwal 43). It is this Hindutva logic which underlines Basu’s denunciation of Gandhi in *A Bend in the Ganges*. Gandhi deserves to be convicted because he advocates “a moral barrier for the construction of baser instincts as the valid political mode” (Agarwal 52). By thus contextualizing the novel’s indictment of non-violence in Savarkar’s call for revenge against violence unleashed by the Muslim League, Malgonkar contests the notion of sanity and moral value implicit in the deification of Mahatma Gandhi.

Malgonkar shows the ineffectualness of non-violence as not only “macro tragedy on a national scale” but also “micro tragedy” of “family feud” at the time of Partition between two sharers (Iyengar 433). Dispute over the land of Piploda leads to the murder of Hari, Gian’s brother at the hands of Vishnu Dutta of the Big House. At the time of murder, Gian is with Hari, but he fails to save his brother’s life. Failure to save his brother raises doubts about non-violence in Gian’s mind: “Was that why he had embraced the philosophy of non-violence without question — from physical cowardice, not from courage? Was his non-violence merely that of the rabbit refusing to confront the hound?” (Malgonkar “A Bend” 44). Gian’s non-violence, which indeed camouflages his cowardice, “crumble[s] the moment

it [meets] a major test" (122). He kills Vishnu Dutta with the same axe with which Hari had been killed. As M. Rajagopalachari rightly remarks, Malgonkar has "deliberately shaped Gian in order to reveal with pitiless irony the gap between precept and practice" (58).

Malgonkar casts Gian as a foil to Debi Dayal, a member of the nationalist terrorist group headed by Singh. These two characters with "contrasting careers" make the readers not only look closely at their character-sketches but also scrutinize "the symbolic content" they represent (Amur 119). The contrast itself is founded on whether they live by a code or not. In this regard, Uma Parmeswaram comments: "Malgonkar seems to say that those who live by a code have the making of hero, while those who have no code are of an inferior mould . . . in *A Bend the Ganges*, Debi has a code, Gian does not" (333). Gian comes out at best as merely a pseudo-Gandhian, as one for whom the Gandhian movement is "merely a face-saving device to shelter his cowardice and poverty behind its tenets" (S. C. Sood 201). Unlike Debi who hates the English and fights against them with terror and violence, Gian holds all Englishmen in high admiration. Padmanabhan quotes historian Bipin Chandra to make the point that Gian's unabashed eulogy of the British is a case of an indoctrinated mind lapping up the propaganda that the British are the moral force of India—"the Mai-Baap [Father and Mother] of the common people of India" (Chandra qtd. in Padmanabhan 63). Gian's allegiance to the jail superintendent Patrick Mulligan makes him "the most despised man" in the Andamans jail where his lie gets Debi in real trouble and from whom he receives the despicable tag of a "scum . . . the sort of man through whom men like Mulligan rule our country, keep us enslaved" (Malgonkar, "A Bend" 192). While Debi Dayal always thinks of escape to wreak violence upon the English in order to force them to quit India, Gian entertains no desire of leaving the island since he thinks he has nothing to go back to. Circumstances, however, force Gian to return to India. After the return, he lies without scruples to make Debi's father give him a decent job and to come intimately close to his sister, Sundari who deliberately develops a sexual relationship with him to avenge her husband's affair with Malini. She calls Gian "a male whore" (324). The narrative shows Gian as a thoroughly negative character, as even the narrator reduces him to "a leper in a world of criminals" (182). The whole point of Gian's negative portrayal is to highlight the hiatus between his belief in the principle of *ahimsa* and his practice of it. Gian acts in complete violation of the principle, the practice of which "involves abstaining from physical injury as well as injury to the soul, as we might say; genuine *ahimsa* is incompatible with the demands of the ego. To use a person only as a means is to do him a moral injury" (Puri 167).

However, Gian's dash from Delhi to Duriabad to rescue Sundari and her parents from the looming attack of the Muslim rioters constitutes what Sood calls "only one of his moments of strength when he can redeem himself" (209). Critical opinion about this moment of strength varies sharply, with some critics taking it as a moment of glory for Gian while others condemning him for letting it go by. James interprets the climactic scene to project Gian as "'Initiation hero'" (123). Gian, according to him, "undergoes a change; he experiences for the first time 'unselfishness,' accepts the world for what it is and emerges as a triumphant victor over falseness" (130). Pradhan, likewise, endorses Amur's estimate that "'the Gian who survives is not the Gian who built his life on falsehood, but a morally regenerated individual'" (144). Disagreeing completely with the above assessment of Gian's character, R. S. Singh writes: "This seeming act of kindness was a calculated move to lay the trap for Sundari. Apparently, his success was symbolical of the triumph of the nationalist movement but, in reality, it was, as Basu evaluated it,

‘even a greater failure than the anarchist movement’” (130). Singh’s critical judgment gives inking into the allegorical value of the rescue act as narrativized in the novel’s finale:

‘What’s wrong!’ a forlorn voice bawled at them. ‘Get a bloody move on! You there! You! — Gian Talwar!’ . . . For a second or two, Gian hesitated. Then he started the engine and threw the car into gear while Mulligan kept motioning him forward with his arm. Then, without looking at Sundari, he released the clutch. The Ford leaped forward. (Malgonkar, “A Bend” 376)

While Mulligan’s giving the driver’s seat to Gian allegorizes the British handover of power to Jawaharlal Nehru, “the final image of an obedient Indian (Gian) driven towards a free India by his former British jailer is certainly far from an image of pride or hope” (Gomathi Narayanan, “British Fathers” 217). Gian’s near paralysis, manifested in his sweat and his wait for guidance from Mulligan, anticipates Malgonkar’s candid treatment in *The Men Who Killed Gandhi* of Nehru’s indecisiveness and his looking for guidance from Lord Mountbatten as compounding the crisis in terms of the Partition victims, the appeasement of Pakistan and the Kashmir war that followed. His failure to save Sundari’s mother, whom Narayanan takes as “the ‘Mother India’ symbolism” (“British Fathers” 217) is tantamount to the dismemberment of Mother India through Partition and the (Congress) government’s abandonment of the fleeing Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan. Looking at the ending as an allegory as it has been intended by Malgonkar, it is apparent that Gian hardly grows; till the end he remains what he is at the outset: a dubious, indecisive, servile and shallow person. Gian, unlike Debi who lives by a code and who stays steady in his convictions and determined in his mission of life, does not possess any code and he remains cowardly, unsteady and undependable till the end. Through Gian’s character, Malgonkar discredits the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence and truth by showing that these ideals are not practicable, as they are contradictory to the facts of life.

Malgonkar’s rejection of Gandhism in favour of the unremembered, uncelebrated but glorious and gallant freedom fighters that fought the English with terror and violence is symbolized in Debi’s positive portrayal. Debi is depicted as being steadfast in his conviction of violence as a valuable tool to take revenge. After utilizing it successfully to an extent against the British in return for the attempted rape of his mother, he utilizes it subtly but most satisfyingly by choosing to hit the lascivious Shafi where it hits him the most, that is, by buying his favourite prostitute, Mumtaz. In a civil war that was played out on women’s bodies, Debi’s method of revenge falls in line with the call for revenge as outlined in *Six Glorious Epochs of History*. Debi comes out as a martyr in the cause of Mother India — whether that cause is to oust the British or to fight the Muslim divisiveness. That Debi has been cast as a martyr becomes ostensible from the way Malgonkar describes his death, “investing the event with poetic and symbolic overtones. The last thing he ever saw was ‘the rising sun in the land of the five rivers on the day of their freedom’” (M. K. Bhatnagar 111). It is largely because of “Debi’s individual calibre, as a freedom fighter” that Malgonkar finds some cause for pride in the heroes of terrorism (Narayanan, “British Fathers”). By thus valorizing the terror and violence of the freedom fighters in contradistinction to Gian’s shallow practice of non-violence, Malgonkar celebrates their unnoticed heroic role in the Independence of India, and in this sense *A Bend in the Ganges* revises textbook history wherein the violent campaign remains largely absent. Malgonkar’s valorization of the violent campaign, however, does not mean that he is uncritical about it. Clarifying the novelist’s position on violence in *A Bend in the Ganges*, Cowasjee writes that for Malgonkar “violence is a fact of our existence—and we must

recognize it as such. In practical terms we may be no better off in doing so, but it would be, to use his own words, 'honest and manly'" (91). *A Bend in the Ganges* suggests that since violence is a bitter reality, a willful renunciation or negation of it, as Gandhi sought to do, is nothing but a blissful blindness, which brings a bigger disaster than its bold cognizance. The valorization of violence in the novel functions as a shock therapy to the Indians lulled to the complacency of denial due to the hype of Gandhian non-violence.

Malgonkar, however, does show the terrorist campaign degrading from the level of national solidarity to communal hatred and violence. The terrorist campaign, as Ranjit Sen points out, did not "permit disunity. This ethical concept of struggle was the surest guarantee against partition" (230). But the disunity does come about through Shafi's unethical betrayal of Debi. Shafi, after letting himself be convinced by Hafiz Khan that the Indian Muslims will be overwhelmed by the Hindu majority in the absence of the British, turns beastly and communal with such a fanatic passion which contributes significantly to the ferocity of the Partition violence which "changed the very hue of India's struggle" (Rupinderjit Saini 108). It is in Malgonkar's diagnosis of the disintegration of the terrorist campaign and in his portrayal of Shafi Usman that his othering of the Muslims is seen. H. G. S. Arulandrum summarizes Malgonkar's description of the rise of Muslim communalism on the eve of Independence:

It was their [Muslims'] firm belief that they were born to rule and not to be ruled over. Unable to adjust themselves to the changing demands of history, they lingered in the aristocratic memories of the Delhi Sultanate and the great Moghul empire and were afraid, mortally afraid of becoming a minority-nobody in India. (14)

Malgonkar's attribution of the rise of Muslim communalism to their psychology of being the conqueror of the Hindus and hence, as the narrative of *A Bend in the Ganges* puts it with reference to Shafi's line of thinking, "unquestionably a superior race," constitutes the Hindutva perception of the enemy Other (Malgonkar, "A Bend" 288). In this Hindutva perception, the whole Muslim history of India becomes "a catalogue of conquests and cruelty," of the barbarism of the Muslims' violent temperament and their perversely licentious character (Gyanendra Pandey 13). It is Malgonkar's foregrounding of Shafi's serpent-like deadliness, hyper-aggressiveness and hyper-sensuality which constitutes the thrust of the chapter, "To Fold a Leaf," in which the villain is portrayed. B. P. Engade recaptures Shafi's portrayal in *A Bend in the Ganges* in a way that reveals a total othering of the Muslims as barbarians, as "vultures and savages" that kept up to "the culture of violence, plunder and destruction that Babar [had] brought with him" (119). While the attack on Sundari and her parents lends credence to Malgonkar's portrayal of Shafi's character, it contrasts so clearly to Debi's gradual love for Mumtaz whom he decides to even wed. The contrast forms an important part of Malgonkar's overall design of pitting the barbarian against the civilized, of making the recalcitrant Islam that dismembered Mother India "with fire and steel, and the prick of the spear" look monstrously irrational (Malgonkar, "A Bend" 289).

With the enemy now being the monstrously irrational Muslims, *A Bend in the Ganges* sees the adherence to non-violence as emasculating the Hindus to the extent that they fail to stand up to the virile enemy. Despite the presence of Gandhi and the so-called civilized Britain, the Indian Independence turned out to be a bloodbath, subjecting millions of Indians to one of the worst barbarism the humanity has ever committed. When the barbarism grips the nation in its octopus-like tentacles, Debi Dayal asks pertinently: "Who had won, Gandhi or the British? For the British at least had foreseen such a development.

Or had they both lost through not having allowed for structural flaws in the human material they were dealing with?" (349). Debi's is "a fundamental question, and a legitimate one, raised by Malgonkar, which should serve as a corrective to the political myth of non-violence often projected as an unquestioned creed during the nationalist struggle" (Kaushik 46). Having thus questioned the effectiveness of non-violence in the wake of the barbaric brutality unleashed by the Muslim League, Debi's reflection on the alternative to non-violence in the same scene underscores Savarkar's influence on Malgonkar:

Yet, what was the alternative? Would terrorism have won freedom at a cheaper price and somehow still kept the Hindus and Muslims together? Perhaps not. But at least it would have been an honest sacrifice, honest and manly—not something that had sneaked upon them in the garb of non-violence" (Malgonkar, "A Bend" 349).

Terrorism may not have succeeded as a counterforce to communalism, but it would have definitely left the Hindus better prepared to fight back, to pay the brutal Muslims back in the same coin: blood for blood. To quote Kaushik again, the call for blood "is as much Malgonkar's answer as of Debi Dayal to one of the most vexing questions of India's nationalist history" (47). Malgonkar's valorization of the call for blood remains interwoven in the fabric of each major episode in *A Bend in the Ganges*. It is his unambiguous treatment of the theme of revenge, which in the words of Abidi, "gives a unity of focus to *A Bend in the Ganges* which it would otherwise have lacked" (78-79).

Unlike Malgonkar's open call for blood in *A Bend in the Ganges*, Gill's *The Rape* (1974), which finds a place in the canon of Indian English Partition Fiction, hovers between a radical political Sikh view and a fictional human view—with the aesthetic representation of the human dimension conceding the ground to the documentary representation interspersed with a flurry of politico-communal editorializing. The novel captures the Partition drama from May 1947 onwards and the fictional action gets underway with the Initiation Ceremony of the eighteen-year-old protagonist, Dalipjit. The ceremony, as the narrative stresses, is invested with "a special significance . . . a call to rise in faith and fight the Muslim tyrants and fanatics who were perpetrating the massacre of the non-Muslims" (Gill 11). Gill here evokes the Khalsa identity conferred upon the Sikhs by the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh. The bestowal, a corollary of the First Initiation Ceremony which instantly changed a meek sparrow into a predatory hawk, underscores "the charismatic power of the Guru in converting the motley crowd of peasants, petty traders, and merchants into fearsome warriors committed to a philosophy of religious war and establishing *dharam* or righteousness on earth" (Purnima Dhawan 6). Gill places this militantly masculinist commitment to *dharamyudha*—"a Khalsa that was staunch and unyielding" (Marcus Baybrook 34) both in the larger historical context of Sikh-Muslim conflict and in the immediate circumstances of Sikh-Muslim riots during Partition. By so doing, *The Rape*, right at the outset, seeks to mobilize Sikh solidarity against the Muslim Other. Beniwal interprets Gill's narrative move here as a "delineati[on of] the present Sikh predicament as an extension of the past, [and as an attempt] to turn both time and space (in the context of Partition) into communal entities and the Sikh history into communal history" (Beniwal 41). By thus interpellating his Sikh readers to Khalsa ethno-nationalism, Gill tells his story of the Partition violence in Punjab in terms that they can understand. The tactic of narrating the naked dance of violence in the Partition riots in the Sikh vernacular idioms dovetailing with their lived experience is aimed at making his insistent line of action for the Sikhs—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—sound cogent to them.

Gill's penchant for Sikh revenge against the Muslims' perpetration of unspeakable violence against the community in Thoa Khalsa village of Rawalpindi district bears testimony to his hawkish approach. Unlike the personal narratives of the Rawalpindi massacre figuring in recent feminist reconstructions of the Punjab violence in 1947 wherein the thrust is on the human dimension even as it carries a critique of the masculinity of the violence perpetrated, Gill merely refers to the Rawalpindi riot, which reminds him "of the terror of Aurangzeb and the wrath of Nadir Shah" in a brazen attempt to spur "the frightened Sikhs and Hindus . . . [towards] a crusade after the Initiation and stem the tide of hatred, arson, murder and loot set off by the Muslim League" (Gill 11). He cites the barbarism of the Muslims against the Sikhs in Rawalpindi and Multan not only as the main reason for the Sikh's decision to stay out of Pakistan (29 & 64-65) but also as a justification for their call for Muslim blood—their resolve "not [to] sleep on a bed till the holocaust was over, till the death of every innocent was avenged" (30).

Gill also justifies the violent tactics of the Sikhs as their helplessness arising from the Sikh leaders "losing the game" (70). He is particularly harsh on Sardar Baldev Singh who, as he alleges, "did not even grasp the situation and was completely blank about what was happening around him" (70). He mentions that "a general trust and overconfidence was being reposed in Giani Kartar Singh and Master Tara Singh" (70). These two Sikh leaders were in the forefront of floating Azad Punjab Scheme, which, as Prithvipal Singh Kapur writes, "called for the detachment of Muslim majority states so as to create a new province in which the Sikh population was maximized and no single community constituted a majority in the proposed set up" (67). As Gill insinuates, the inflexible attitude of these firebrand leaders did not make solid headway because of the Congress's insistence on non-violence: "The Sikh community was caught in a dilemma. Its leaders were all out for fight and violence to have their way, but the Congress leaders were not caring much for the threat" (Gill 69). Let down by their leaders—both the Akalis and the Congress, the Sikhs in self-defence, maintains Raj Gill, "started preparing with guns and spears not to obtain what they were denied but to hold on to what they had, to meet the onslaught by the Muslims which they vaguely knew would break upon them and which was to be fought back if they were to survive" (70).

Gill's justifying Sikh violence against the Muslims as having arisen out of helplessness and the need for self-defence forms part of his strategy of othering the Muslims as barbarians. He falls back on newspaper headlines such as "Muslims perpetuate limitless cruelties. Women's breasts chopped off. Nude women made to lead a Muslim procession" (29). He describes the fall-out of the reprisal by the Hindus and Sikhs in East Punjab as inviting State atrocities on the evacuees in Pakistan:

Army tanks were used in Sheikhpur to mow down the non-Muslim population sheltering in the cotton mills. Armed forces connived at the general shooting of the Sikh and Hindu refugees awaiting evacuation in the Lyallpur camp. Police constabulary was employed in the senseless killing of the departing Hindu population in Jhang and Multan. (158-59)

The othering of Pakistan as a barbaric nation takes on a definite edge when Gill describes how Pakistan Army delayed the passage of the caravan for two days to "divest[...] men of the arms, women of ornaments and slaughtered the whole lot and threw them in the river where most of the bodies did not even submerge properly" (195). By so implicating the State of Pakistan in the victimhood of the evacuees, Gill anticipates Anders Bjørn Hansen in characterizing the Muslim-perpetrated violence qualifying as genocide

(Hansen 16-30). The othering becomes total when Kartar Singh tells Dalipjit that he does not believe his own Muslim servants even though they swear by their Prophet to affirm their loyalty to him:

Muslims are always disloyal, undependable. Their history is full of such instances. Did they not turn against their own Prophet? And the Mughals—dethroning the father, the brother. In fact these Muslims . . . are pigs, deceivers, and betrayers. (Gill 67)

Such a demonization of Muslims in general and the subcontinental Muslims in particular turns out to be a highly inflammatory description—a description in which the intolerable Other, to quote Stanley Tambiah's words, "is so exaggerated and magnified that this stereotyped 'other' must be degraded, determined and compulsively *obliterated*" (Author's emphasis. qtd. in Ashis Nandy, "The Invisible Holocaust" 320). Such a brazen use of the prose of otherness makes Gill's representation of the Partition violence crudely partisan. After objectifying the Muslims as the total Other, his deliberate attempt to match Muslim atrocities with Sikh-Hindu ones turns out to be an obvious artifice—what Veena Das and Ashis Nandy dismiss as "inauthentic literature" (88). Unlike the documentary representation of the violence in West Punjab, the language that Raj Gill uses to represent the violence on the Muslims in East Punjab shuns graphic descriptions and condemns the violence in only general terms. In an attempt to disown the memories and locate the violence outside normality—beyond the domain of the civilized society of the Sikhs and the Hindus—, he shifts the focus to the loss of the value of human life in a period of "witches' sabbath" (Gill 191).

Dalipjit, however, cannot disown the memories; he is caught in a dilemma: whether to dissociate himself from the sabbath or to forget and forgive or to commit suicide. The vacillation between revenge and forgiveness continues right from the Initiation Ceremony in which he says he had participated "to join Jasmit (his beloved) in taking an oath of their abiding love" (14). Loyalty to his family and obligation to his community demand him to bay for Muslim blood but the emotion of love forbids him to do so. The emotion of love ultimately prevails over his equally strong other two emotions, thereby not only persuading him to forbear the provocations of his bugbear, Santokh, but also making him recoil from taking Muslim lives on two occasions—the first time sparing the throat of Jalal and the second time the head of Leila's father. Dalipjit's capacity to show humanity at such junctures makes K. K. Sharma and B. K. Johri see Gill as "fervently plead[. . . ing] for forgiveness and appear[. . . ing] to echo Shakespeare's message in *The Tempest* that virtue lies in forgiveness, not vengeance" (Sharma and Johri 135).

The theme of forgiveness in *The Rape*, however, remains muted under the weight of the narrator's call for Muslim blood "as a pure fraternal gesture towards those belonging to their religion and community" (Gill 208). Even Dalipjit's capacity to forgive turns out to be as fake as the phoney balancing of the violence in the two Punjabs: "... the angry man that he is, Dalipjit does not dwell on the need to forgive. He merely decides to forget, wipe off his past and alienate himself from the polluted generation" (Narayanan, "Indo-Anglian Novels" 46). As the narrative of *The Rape* states before the evacuation, Dalipjit remains "lost in vicarious thoughts of participating in riots, leading his people safely through the carnage and killing a hundred thousand Muslims in chastisement of their fanaticism" (Gill 146). The suppression of the urge for revenge, which manifests in Dalipjit's vicarious participation of the genocide of the Muslims, also shows up in his imaginative killing of Mahatma Gandhi. In his semi-conscious state while recovering

from the pneumonic fever, Dalipjit claims to have killed Gandhi because of his hatred of the Mahatma for the latter's betrayal of the Sikhs and Hindus residing in the West Punjab. Like Godse, he holds Gandhi guilty of Partition in which "the guts of the innocent [became] the offering, the blood of millions, the oblation to the independence which was thought to have been won without the sword and the fire, with non-violence, understanding, and by turning the other cheek to the enemy" (129). The imaginative parricide of the so-called Father of the Nation does not come all of sudden. Right from the beginning, Dalipjit shows his strong disagreement with Gandhi's "fakir's ways" (25). His aversion represents the anger of the Sikhs in the West Punjab at Gandhi's double game and his "incomprehensible, implicit antagonism of their community" (69). In this connection, Chittrabrata Palit quotes historian Michael Edwards who "concludes that 'after independence, the orthodox Hindu political parties were to attack Gandhi violently for having played a double game and it was such attacks which led finally, though indirectly, to his assassination by a Hindu extremist in January 1948'" (Palit 58).

By paralleling the protagonist on the lines of Nathuram Godse, Raj Gill undermines the message of forgiveness with which he interweaves the fabric of the narrative at the end by underlining "that the cycle of revenge must be liquidated through love, sympathy, kindness, understanding, restraint and forgiveness" (Sharma and Johri 135). It is precisely Dalipjit's motive of revenge, which faces a definite roadblock from Gandhi's policy of non-violence, that makes him criticize the Mahatma's absorption in the "spiritual world to [the extent that he does not] realize the practical implications of things gone wrong" (Gill 241). The criticism echoes Godse's pinning the responsibility for Partition on Gandhi, who, according to the assassin, "wanted to protect his personal saintliness, if not leadership, at the cost of the country" (qtd. in Palit 59). *The Rape* fails as literature: it remains structurally flawed with the theme of forgiveness suddenly seeming to win out at the end while consistently losing its ground all through the narrative in its tug of war with the theme of revenge. With the motive of revenge remaining to the extent that Dalipjit has to turn a Nathuram Godse, the strong streaks of mercy and forgiveness in the protagonist seem to have been superimposed.

Unlike Raj Gill, however, Malgonkar gives a sophisticated treatment of the theme of revenge by aesthetically transmuting his rejection of *ahimsa* through an intense dialectic between violence and non-violence, between Gandhi and Savarkar. In so far as both Malgonkar and Gill look upon Gandhi's doctrine of non-violence as perverted in the face of what they see as Islamic terror, *The Rape* and *A Bend in the Ganges* enunciate a view at odds with the nationalistic (Congress) representation of Partition. The cumulative lesson emerging from these novels is not to believe in the treacherous Muslims and to tolerate no more any intolerance to the Hindus and the Sikhs—a message that is music to the ears of the Indians holding right-wing views. Such a narration of history, which enacts the construction of an internal enemy, in the words of Sankaran Krishna, "has corralled our entire future into a box labeled 'the Unfinished Business of Partition'" (194). But both *A Bend in the Ganges* and *The Rape*, in obvious deviance from Krishna's liberal line, strongly suggest the adoption of violence to finish the unfinished business of the Partition of India. Malgonkar, who takes cognizance of revenge in Hindu scriptures, legitimizes it in *A Bend in the Ganges* not only as an ethic but also as an aesthetic of proportion and balance vis-à-vis the rampaging Muslims at a highly surcharged juncture in Indian history. On the contrary, Raj Gill's call for excessive revenge against the Sikhs' traditional *bête noire* in *The Rape* turns out to be a feeble substantiation done in a Khalsa ethno-nationalistic sweep



and when he becomes aware of the extremism, he hastily tries to temper it with an emphasis on forgiveness. Malgonkar's artistic control of the theme of revenge becomes so striking compared to Gill's glaring lack of it.

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# Talking Long Distance to the Dead: Agha Shahid Ali's Poetic Genealogy

ANJANA NEIRA DEV

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**Abstract:** The family is a tissue of relationships and conventions, which provides a poet with a rich store of human feeling and a structure against which to trace and analyze it. As post Independence Indian English poets write about their families, they make for themselves an inner history and give a name to their past. The re-telling of one's own family story becomes an act of faith and sometimes, an act of exorcism. Writing after Independence, and at a time when the nation was becoming more pluralistic one of the reasons for the family becoming a primary site of personal identity for a poet could be the consciousness of the fact that their place in the cosmos is determined (at least partially) by their paternity. In the poems of Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), his family has a very important place and is closely tied in with his memories of home. Because this is a home to which he cannot return, the memories take on an added poignancy and death becomes his adolescent password and a recurrent motif in the poems. The legacy that he inherits is heirlooms of sorrow/ left in wills of ancestors and a plot in the family graveyard. Through a close reading of his poems, this paper will look at Agha Shahid Ali's poetic quests of being and belonging and also in the process, arrive at an understanding of the contours of his home and homeland.

*Keywords:* Agha Shahid Ali, Family, Ancestors, Kashmir, Indian English Poetry

The family is a tissue of relationships and conventions, which provides a poet with a rich store of human feeling and a structure against which to trace and analyze it. As post independence Indian English poets write about their families, they make for themselves an inner history and give a name to their past. The re-telling of one's own family story becomes an act of faith and sometimes, an act of exorcism. Writing after independence, and at a time when the nation was becoming more pluralistic one of the reasons for the family becoming a primary site of personal identity for a poet could be the consciousness of the fact that their place in the cosmos is determined (at least partially) by their paternity<sup>1</sup>. This genealogical method of enquiry into the complex web of relationships that constitutes the web of Indianness becomes a more helpful way of re(dis)covering the mystery of the Indian past and as national history cuts across personal narratives, questions of self-recovery and cultural identity acquire poignancy and pertinence.

This retrieval is not just an exercise in nostalgia and the past is looked at with irony, self-parody and detachment. The details are often quotidian and small things become important as they constitute the mundane materiality of everyday life, mocking in their earthiness the grand paradigms of history<sup>2</sup>. For the urban-based poet the family becomes an important source of identity as the environment is one in which, in the words of

Hobsbawm, we encounter strangers: uprooted men and women who remind us of the fragility or the drying up of our own families roots<sup>3</sup>. The family is a means to connect the past, as the poets carry it in their heads, with the present as it exists, and a lot of the poems grow out of this tension. There is a persistent preoccupation with personal ties and a concerted attempt to reconstruct the building blocks of individual identity - name, family, ancestors and community.

The writers place themselves somewhere between 'rootedness' and 'restlessness' and 'reassemble fragments of family history and narrate interesting family sagas, with a recurrent 'backward glance'<sup>4</sup>. The idea of a home is a combination of memory and desire and the imaginative world of the poets is largely peopled by the community and family in which they were raised.

While there is a "psychic re-living of one's imagined origins"<sup>5</sup>, the poets are not univocal about the value of tradition. Tradition is seen not only as a chronology of past events, but also as something that continually impinges on the present in not always desirable ways. There is also no formula or time-span to determine the feeling of 'being at home' and as Said says, the contrast is between exile and "the sense of being extremely well-located in one's own home"<sup>6</sup>. It is evident in the poetry of these poets that the feeling of belonging is not contingent upon geography and depends mainly upon how well located the poet is in his/her own nation of the mind. An individual who is aware of his/her roots knows that these roots have many names - "heritage, tradition, moorings, belongingness". For the writer it becomes important to "return to the roots" when s/he realizes that "tomorrow (and in fact today) cannot be fully understood without yesterday and its equally valid dreams and despairs"<sup>7</sup>.

As each writer tells his/her story, the whole question of the reliability of memory also comes up. In a passionate defense of "imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind", nearly all the poets seem to echo the sentiments of Salman Rushdie who writes,

The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. There is an obvious parallel here with archaeology. The broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects. It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity.... The broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also, I believe, a useful tool with which to work in the present...Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries...people hated, people loved.<sup>8</sup>

As each of the poets explores his/her personal history, they give a shape to the 'usable past' with which they negotiate as they try and define themselves in the present. As C. Vijayasree also points out, 'each of the writers use a variety of strategies of self-definition which is thematized and explored in a wide range of fictional tropes such as: anonymity or namelessness, search for home, renewal of family ties, evocation of imaginary homelands, interrogation of contemporary notions of nation and nationalism and a dialectic of cultural differences.' She adds that, in their general struggle to define their multiple and shifting identities, the writers display a 'persistent preoccupation with a deliberate reconstruction of the original guideposts of identity - name, family, community and country'<sup>9</sup>.

In the poems of Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), his family has a very important place and is closely tied in with his memories of home. Because this is a home to which he

cannot return, the memories take on an added poignancy and death becomes his 'adolescent password'<sup>10</sup> and a recurrent motif in the poems. The legacy that he inherits is "heirlooms of sorrow/ left in wills of ancestors"<sup>11</sup> and "a plot in the family graveyard"<sup>12</sup>.

In the chapbook, *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*, Shahid Ali has a piece titled "It's getting late. Do Your friends know where you are?" in which his reply to this question is

They know my debts are unpaid,  
they won't look for me. But  
if they call, say I'm at the phone booth  
talking long distance to the dead.<sup>13</sup>

These conversations with people, whose absence is a powerful presence in his life, form the refrain of his poetry. As Lawrence D. Needham says,

Ali came to a strong sense of his familial and cultural resources as he dealt with separation and partial estrangement". He then goes on to say that, "In their absence the members of the poet's family are present in his memory; despite longing, however, he safeguards against nostalgia by refusing to sentimentalize the past. Nostalgia for an "authentic" time (the "real" past) or an "authentic" place (the "real" India) eventuates in a frame of mind that not only does violence to history, but also ultimately diminishes the value and uses of memory, Ali's primary resource and subject in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. One of his chief objects is ...to avoid the frozen embrace of the past through exercising and emphasizing the re-creative powers of memory."<sup>14</sup>

Family ancestors are an "obsession" for this poet, according to Bruce King and he believes that Shahid Ali's continuous attempt is to find "links and continuity with origins". The burden of his poems is the tragic fact that he can never go back to his childhood home and the poems are "fantasies of the history of his family" and the "existential anxieties" of leaving 'home'. "While autobiography often starts in a golden age of childhood which is lost in growing up, Ali's obsession with expulsion from the womb, home and tradition is remarkably intense; it results in a poetry symbolic of the cultural and political changes of our time"<sup>15</sup>.

In "Cracked Portraits" Agha Shahid Ali writes of his paternal ancestors and traces his line of descent, saying

"My grandfather's painted grandfather,  
son of Ali (...)  
He's left us plots  
in the family graveyard.  
Great-grandfather? A sahib in breeches. (...)  
He wound the gramophone to a fury,  
the needles grazing Malika Pukhraj's songs  
as he drunk, tore his shirts  
and wept at the refrain,  
"I still am young."  
(...)  
I turn the pages,  
see my father holding a tennis racquet,  
ready to score with women, (...)  
He brings me closer to myself  
as he quotes Lenin's love of Beethoven,  
but loses me as he turns to Gandhi.  
Silverfish have eaten his boyhood face.

Cobwebs cling  
to the soundless  
words of my ancestors.  
No one now comes from Kandahar,  
dear Ali, to pitch tents by the Jhelum,  
under autumn maples,  
and claim descent from the holy prophet.  
Your portrait is desolate  
in a creaking corridor.”<sup>16</sup>

Another poem in this volume, “*Story of a Silence*” talks about his grandfather’s death after he has been reduced to a shadow through loss and disappointment. More than his grandfather, it is the poet’s grandmother who is being talked of here, in terms of her courage while she was alive and the impact her example made on the poet. He writes

“my grandmother worked hard, harder  
than a man to earn  
her salary from the government and  
deserve her heirloom  
of prayer from God.”<sup>17</sup>

Shahid Ali’s progenitors participate in a continued legacy of loss and exile and “*The Dacca Gauzes*” are a symbol of this loss. In the poem the poet talks about how his grandmother inherited “an heirloom sari” made of

transparent Dacca gauze(s)  
known as woven air, running  
water, evening dew<sup>18</sup>

Like so many other legacies of the past, this art too is ‘dead’ and the poet’s grandmother tries hard to preserve it by making handkerchiefs for all the women in the family, but “those too now lost”.

In “*Notes from Autumn Wars*”<sup>19</sup> the mood is autumnal and the poet mourns the passing away of his ancestors and all that gave him his sense of belonging. In *The Half-Inch Himalayas* there is a poem called “*A Dream of Glass Bangles*” in which the poet uses the image of the glass to mirror the image of his home. The earlier image is of a haven and the later one a ruin that has been shattered beyond recall. He writes

Those autumns my parents slept  
warm in a quilt studded  
with pieces of mirrors.  
On my mother’s arms were bangles  
like waves of frozen rivers  
and at night  
after the prayers  
as she went down to her room  
I heard the faint sound of ice  
breaking on the staircase  
breaking years later  
into winter  
our house surrounded by men  
pulling icicles for torches (...)  
till the cement’s darkening red  
set the tips of water on fire (...)

as my father stepped out  
and my mother  
inside the burning house  
a widow smashing the rivers  
on her arms<sup>20</sup>

The poet merges the images of his mother and motherland so inextricably that when he writes of the death of one, the destruction of the other is immediately evoked for the reader. This is a litany he will return to again and again until his mother symbolizes all that he cherished in the past and has now lost irretrievably. Another memory of the poet's parents includes one where he talks about their secular and liberal attitude to life, which the poet internalized and in "*Note Autobiographical – 1*"<sup>21</sup> he writes about this in vivid anecdotal detail.

If it is perpetual winter in their lives and in Kashmir now, the poet remembers a time when the year had "four clear seasons". In this poem "*The Season of the Plains*" he contrasts those happier days to the present and writes

my mother  
spoke of her childhood  
in the plains of Lucknow, and  
of that season in itself,  
the monsoon, when Krishna's  
flute is heard on the shores  
of the Jamuna. (...)  
My mother  
hummed Heer's lament  
but never told me if she  
also burned sticks  
of jasmine that, dying,  
kept raising soft necks  
of ash. (...)  
She only  
said: The monsoons never cross  
the mountains into Kashmir.<sup>22</sup>

Thinking of his mother as a young woman and with a history that precedes his birth, he imagines his parents on the day on which he was conceived and writes in the poem "*A Lost Memory of Delhi*"

"I am not born  
it is 1948 (...)  
There on his bicycle  
My father (...)  
My mother is a recent bride  
her sari a blaze of brocade  
Silverdust parts her hair (...)  
They go into the house  
always faded in photographs  
in the family album  
but lit up now".<sup>23</sup>

In this poem and others, the poet talks about his legacy of exile as all his ancestors came from elsewhere and carried the memories of their home with them. His poems about his

family reverberate with loss and he returns again and again to them only to be left alone. In this and other poems, there is a curious reversal of traditional roles as the poet sees himself as the parent and his parents as children to be protected from harm and knowledge of evil and horror. In the poem "*A Call*" he writes

I close my eyes. It doesn't leave me  
the cold moon of Kashmir which breaks  
into my house  
and steals my parent's love.  
I open my hands:  
empty, empty. This cry is foreign.  
"When will you come home?"  
Father asks, then asks again.  
The ocean moves into the wires.  
I shout, "Are you all happy?"  
The line goes dead.<sup>24</sup>

Separated as he is from his home, the poet thinks of it often and for him it is a haven which, he can keep intact only in his memory. The reality of what has happened to that haven and all those who inhabited it is too horrific for him to contemplate. In "*Houses*" he writes

The man who buries his house in the sand  
and digs it up again, each evening,  
learns to put it together quickly  
and just as quickly to take it apart.  
My parents sleep like children in the dark  
I am too far to hear them breathe  
but I remember their house is safe  
and I can sleep (...)  
I am thirteen thousand miles from home.<sup>25</sup>

This image of security is shattered as soon as the poet gets news of home in which his friend's father is dead and the neighbour's house has been burned down. He dare not wake up or the illusion of a return to safety will be irrevocably shattered.

The poet will return to this house many years later in "*Return to Harmony 3*". The tragic irony implied in the title of the poem signals its mood as the poet realizes the impossibility of a return to the harmony of his childhood. As he reaches there he writes

"This is home – the haven a cage surrounded by ash – the fate of Paradise. (...)  
A bunker has put the house under a spell. Shadowed eyes watch me open the gate, like a trespasser." <sup>26</sup>

As he sees the dead roses "choked in their beds" and the piles of unopened mail he wonders what happened to the gardener and the postman. As he opens the door the poet finds

The Koran still protects the house, lying strangely wrapped in a *jamawar* shawl where my mother had left it on the walnut table by the fireplace. Above, *If God is with you, Victory is near!* – the framed calligraphy ruthless behind cobwebs.<sup>27</sup>

He wonders at the protection that religion has given to the house, but not its inhabitants. The phone is also dead and "its number exiled from its instrument". When he picks up



the receiver all he can hear is a radio transmitting songs of loss and separation. He goes through the bedrooms upstairs and finds his books and his parents' wedding photograph in which they are "beautiful in their wedding brocades, so startlingly young!" The sights and memories are too much for him and he says:

And there in black and white my mother, eighteen years old (...) so unforgivingly beautiful that the house begins to shake in my arms, and when the unarmed world is still again, with pity, it is the house that is holding me in its arms and the cry coming faded from its empty rooms is my cry.<sup>28</sup>

In the same poem he also refers to the "Annex" of the house which was his grandmother's cottage and which he will return to in "*Some Vision of the World Cashmere*" [28]. While far away in Amherst, when he hears that his grandmother is dying and he pictures himself going to her house. Returning to the poem, the poet imagines his grandmother coming back to the house and with her presence making it a home again. He writes:

The mirrors have grieved in her absence. They run to greet her at the door. It is her home again! (...) And I'm holding her hand in that sun which is shining on all the summers of my childhood, shining on a teardrop in which windows are opening, amplifying her voice, and she is telling me, *God is merciful, God is compassionate*.<sup>29</sup>

This image is as powerful, as it is heartbreakingly ephemeral. The poet's anguish is for the evanescence of his loved ones and of all that he holds dear and is now destroyed and lost. Even in a dream narrative he cannot escape to a world untouched by sorrow. Horror and death scar every imaginative reconstruction of his home.

In the poem, "*A Fate's Brief Memoir*" [29] the poet talks about his sisters who share his agony of loss and exile and he says

My sister should shortly  
be here (...)  
and in the stars' light each of us lonely. (...)  
But we know nothing of our own birth.  
Suddenly we were here – call us orphans –  
beautiful certainly, with ties not worth  
our while, each strand recalled by oblivion (...)  
*Do you also spin the threads of nations?* (...)  
My sister's hands – the youngest one's –  
shook when she let a nation go.  
Finally no one is ours (...)  
Our ties are zero,  
Thinned with melting dew.<sup>30</sup>

In all the poems where Shahid Ali talks about his family, the most pronounced tone is one of loss and despair and regret. What he carries with him are memories of his parents and grandmother, who gave him his identity and sense of self. "Exile offers him unconfined and unpeopled space into which, one at a time, he introduces human figures....Just as exile provides each memory with its own space, absence gives high definition to that what is absent, be it landscape, lover or self."<sup>31</sup>

To better understand the hold of his family on his imagination, it is necessary to look at those poems where he talks about ancestors and genetic legacies. It is these ancestors who give him a sense of rootedness and belonging and the separation and severance of these roots is the primary cause of his alienation and his sense of being in exile.

In the poem "*Resume*"<sup>32</sup> the poet sees himself as "the secretary of memory/ in chambers of weeds" and every application he makes, to find his own image even in a reflection, is rejected. In "*Legends of Kashmir*" he begins with a section called 'A Lost Tribe' and talks about the original home of his ancestors and their journey to Kashmir. He sees amnesia as a necessary part of making a foreign country home and says that "such forgetting" is "necessary to plant roots" and he writes "we forgot how or why we came here." He says in the poem

They saw we Kashmiris, one of Israel's  
lost tribes, cut through acres of air  
to this Himalayan vale, and wailed  
at the frozen naked peaks. Our clothes  
cold, we wore parchment till our past  
burst at the seams, our hope of return  
torn to shreds. No ghosts of our gods left.<sup>33</sup>

The poet's ancestors could claim Kashmir as their home only by forgetting their original homeland and finding ways to adapt to the new landscape. Shahid Ali is not blessed with a similar amnesiac ability and memories of his home continue to haunt him all his life.

In *The Beloved Witness* Shahid Ali has a number of poems on death and in each of them he speaks of his ancestors. He believes that with the erasure of the symbols of his history has come the erasure of his self. In "*Bones*" he writes

I'm still alone.  
Death filled the years, there  
was no time to mourn. No time to remember  
slaughtered martyrs or ancestors  
who knew a history of miracles (...)  
In this mosaic world of silent  
graveyards the difference lies between  
death and dying. Its  
futile to light oil lamps here  
and search for grandfather or  
forgotten ancestors. Their  
flesh must have turned soft as dust  
and how can one complain to bones?<sup>34</sup>

In "*Autumn in Srinagar*" the poet sees the death of all that was familiar and made up his home and writes

in this  
terrible darkness  
i hear  
bangles break"<sup>35</sup>

and in "*Another Death*" he wonders

"That stone we worshipped  
long ago holds a savage emptiness.  
Will we return to find it? In  
the stone the buried shadow of time  
that has passed to nowhere?"<sup>36</sup>

When the poet is surrounded by bones, skeletons, graves and shadows he thinks of the legacy left to him by his ancestors and resolves to transform it and writes in "*Snowmen*"

My ancestor, a man  
 of Himalayan snow,  
 came to Kashmir from Samarkand (...)  
 His skeleton  
 carved from glaciers, his breath  
 arctic (...)  
 This heirloom  
 his skeleton under my skin, passed  
 from son to grandson,  
 generations of snowmen on my back.  
 They tap every year on my window,  
 their voices hushed to ice.  
 No they won't let me out of winter,  
 and I've promised myself,  
 even if I'm the last snowman,  
 that I'll ride into spring  
 on their melting shoulders.<sup>37</sup>

"Recognizing his forbear as a man of Himalayan snow", says Lawrence D. Needham, "the poet claims a legacy of change and transition. Exile is in his bones, and the poem serves as a justification for his current exiled condition. Re-creating the past, providing his own version of it, is thus enabling, unburdening him of generations of snowmen on his back who would press him into winter. At the same time, the past is the necessary ground for change; the poet rides into spring on the melting shoulders of the snowmen."<sup>38</sup>

It is only when the thaw sets in that the poet believes he can find some place to call his own and in the poem "*Beyond the Ash Rain*" he writes

When the desert refused my history,  
 refused to acknowledge that I had lived (...)  
 You showed me the relics  
 of our former life, proof that we'd at last  
 found each other (...)  
 You took my hand, and (...)  
 vulnerable  
 to our suddenly bare history in which I was,  
 but you said won't again be singled  
 out for loss in your arms, won't ever again  
 be exiled, never again, from your arms.<sup>39</sup>

This is only a temporary relief for the poet who realizes by the last poem in this collection, "*Snow on the Desert*"

a time  
 to recollect  
 every shadow, everything the earth was losing,  
 a time to think of everything the earth  
 and I had lost, of all  
 that I would lose,  
 of all that I was losing.<sup>40</sup>

All the images of grief and loss coalesce in his final collection of poems *Rooms are Never Finished* where the poet talks at length about his mother's death and the way in which his world shattered when she was not in it. One of the earliest references we have is to the almost pre-natal bonds between mother and son in a piece called "*Hansel's Game*"<sup>41</sup>. When

the poet's mother is sick in hospital, he watches her suffering and prays for her death, so that she can be released from pain. All the family poems in his final collection refer to the death of his mother. For the poet the loss of his mother and his mother-land combine in a series of poems that resound with suffering and pain and the metaphor of loss applies to all that the poet has lost beyond recall.

In "*Lennox Hill*" he prays for his mother's death as a release from suffering and writes

I prayed: If she must die,  
let it only be some dream. But there were times, Mother,  
while you slept, that I prayed, "Saints, let her die."  
Not, I swear by you, that I wished you to die  
but to save you as you were, young, in song in Kashmir, (...)  
Thus I swear, here and now, not to forgive the universe  
that would let me get used to a universe  
without you.

He then goes on to say

Mother,  
they asked me, *So how's the writing?* I answered *My mother  
is my poem.* (...)  
"As you sit here by me, you're just like my mother,"  
she tells me. I imagine her: a bride in Kashmir,  
she's watching, at the Regal, her first film with Father.  
If only I could gather you in my arms, Mother,  
I'd save you – now my daughter – from God. The universe  
opens its ledger. I write: How helpless was God's mother! (...)  
I enter this: *The Beloved leaves one behind to die.*  
For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir,  
and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe  
when I remember you – beyond all accounting – O my mother?<sup>42</sup>

For the poet everything that he loves is linked to his mother and one of his passions, the poetry of Faiz, is also the legacy of his mother. In "*Summers of Translation*" he writes of his attempts to translate Faiz's poem '*Memory*' and of his memories of his mother's stories. Her voice resounds in his mind and he writes

For your voice could make any story so various,  
so new, that even terrible pain would decrease  
into wonder. But for me, I who of passion  
always make a holocaust, will there be a summer of peace?  
A mother dies. There's a son's execution.<sup>43</sup>

At his mother's last request her family takes her body back to Kashmir for burial and the next set of poems in this collection talk about the poet's feelings as they all return to his mother's home, with her body. In "*New Delhi Airport*" he writes

How she longed for home, to return alive, go  
home to light candles...(...)  
We are such pilgrims  
too, returning thus with her shrine. It enters  
first the hold's, then memory's desolation.<sup>44</sup>

After his mother has been buried and it is "*The Fourth Day*"<sup>45</sup> he writes of how "the flames deserted their wicks in the shrines" after she had gone. Even the moon seems to

mock at the poet's grief as it shines without care on the world in which the poet's mother is no longer there.

Finally, in the poem "*I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World*" the poet says his final farewell to all that he has loved and lost.

As he writes, "SO IT'S ANOTHER CHRONICLE OF LOSS.../AND LOVE". In a dream narrative he imagines being rowed across the waters of the Dal lake in Srinagar and arrives at

Shahid when you smile,  
it seems your mother has returned to life. We all know  
how you – you all – miss her. (...) Now *Khuda Hafiz*. I've  
nothing more to say (...)  
But let it not end" IT WON'T "this grief for your mother."<sup>46</sup>

The poet imagines his mother telling him not to weep her for any more as she wants him to believe that she will always be with him in all that he does and all his love for her cannot fight the inevitability of loss. The poem ends with the voice of the poet's friend, who too is dead, saying "SHAHID, HUSH. THIS IS ME, JAMES. THE LOVED ONE ALWAYS LEAVES."<sup>47</sup>

Since his grandparents, parents and siblings are the only family that Shahid Ali ever had, his attachment to them is all the more vital and essential for his poetic existence. This includes even those in the past, like his grandparents and thus memory plays a very important role in this poet's reconstruction of his home. For Shahid Ali then, the family is the cornerstone and fountainhead of his personal and poetic identity. This poet's incessant backward glance to the remote and recent past and his writing about the loss of all that is beloved to him adds to the poignancy of his poems. Notwithstanding the regret he expresses at these losses, there is no morbidity in the poems because the poet's memories are all happy ones. This poet does not need to search for a place to belong to; all he has to do is conjure up the memories of his family and he is home.

The role of the family in the articulation of the self in the context of the Indian nation is articulated by Agha Shahid Ali through the tropes of memory, genealogy and the materials and modes of experience. The poet resorts to various techniques to weave an idea of belonging even when he is away from the locations of his childhood. The warp and the weft of this tapestry are the past and the present between which he alternates. There is in this reconstruction a fear of forgetting and it is the intense attachment towards his personal past that enables a retrieval of those memories to reconstruct the past. In the final analysis, home is a vital component in Agha Shahid Ali's poetic identity and a vital constituent of his personal identity too. He knows that home is where the hearts is and he conjures it up in powerful kinesthetic images to remember who he is by recalling where he comes from.

## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> Nanavati, U.M. and Kar, Prafulla C. Editors. *Rethinking Indian English Literature*. Delhi: Pencraft International. 2000. Pages 15-21.
- <sup>3</sup> Mishra, V. "New Lamps for Old: Diasporas Migrancy Border" in *Interrogating Post-Colonialism* edited by H. Trivedi and M. Mukherjee. Shimla: IIAS. 1996. Page 72.
- <sup>4</sup> Vijayasree, C. "The Politics and Poetics of Expatriation: The Indian Version(s)" in *Interrogating Post-Colonialism* edited by H. Trivedi and M. Mukherjee. Shimla: IIAS. 1996. Page 225.
- <sup>5</sup> King, Bruce. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1987. Page 204.
- <sup>6</sup> Said, Edward W. "Reflections of an Exile", *Biblio*: November-December 1999. Page 13.
- <sup>7</sup> Mahapatra, S. *The Role of Tradition in Literature*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. 1997. Pages 79-84.
- <sup>8</sup> Rushdie, S. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981 – 1991*. London: Granta Books. 1991. Pages 10-12.
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- <sup>10</sup> Ali, Agha Shahid. *In Memory of Begum Akhtar*. Calcutta: Writer's Workshop, 1979. Page 13.
- <sup>11</sup> Ali, Agha Shahid. *In Memory of Begum Akhtar*. Calcutta: Writer's Workshop, 1979. Page 24.
- <sup>12</sup> Ali, Agha Shahid. *The Country Without a Post Office*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1997. Page 73.
- <sup>13</sup> Ali, Agha Shahid. *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*. Tucson: Sun – Gemini Press, 1987.
- <sup>15</sup> Needham, Lawrence D. "Agha Shahid Ali (1949- )" in *Writers of the Indian Diaspora: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* edited by Emmanuel S. Nelson. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 1993. Pages 11-12.
- <sup>16</sup> King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets: Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan and Dom Moraes*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1991. Page 13.
- <sup>17</sup> Ali, Agha Shahid. *The Half – Inch Himalayas*. USA: Wesleyan University Press, 1987. Pages 9-10.
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- <sup>21</sup> Ali, Agha Shahid. *The Half – Inch Himalayas*. USA: Wesleyan University Press, 1987. Page 7.
- <sup>22</sup> Ali, Agha Shahid. *In Memory of Begum Akhtar*. Calcutta: Writer's Workshop, 1979. Page 20.
- <sup>23</sup> Ali, Agha Shahid. *The Half – Inch Himalayas*. USA: Wesleyan University Press, 1987. Pages 17-18.
- <sup>24</sup> Ali, Agha Shahid. *The Half – Inch Himalayas*. USA: Wesleyan University Press, 1987. Page 5.
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- <sup>39</sup> Ali, Agha Shahid. *A Nostalgist's Map of America*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1991., Pages 23-24.
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- <sup>44</sup> Ali, Agha Shahid. *Rooms are Never Finished*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2001. Pages 38-39.
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# The Progressive and Untouchable Body: A Reading of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

RAJ KUMAR

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**Abstract:** The so-called Indian Renaissance in the nineteenth century was characterized by a reform movement that attempted to rid society of its old orthodoxies regarding caste, class and gender. Women's education, widow re-marriage, equality before God were some of the issues taken up by the leaders in different parts of the country. Yet strangely enough in the creative literature of that period the low caste people and the outcastes are virtually invisible. The situation was not very different in the early decades of the twentieth century. Except for a Telugu novel *Mala Palli* (1921) by Unnava Lakshminarayana which deals with the Malas, an untouchable community of Andhra Pradesh no novelist in India seems to have focussed on the large section of the dispossessed and exploited people. Premchand's novel *Rangbhumi*, (Hindi: 1925) was the next attempt made by an Indian writer to write about caste and untouchability questions. Though Sivarama Karanth's *Chomanadudi* (Kannada: 1933) is another attempt to depict the life of an untouchable family, its English translation was not available till 1978. From that point of view Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) seems to be a pioneering attempt to give visibility to the silent and shadowy community who maintain cleanliness and health of the upper caste people.

The present paper looks into how Indian upper caste writers who were privileged to write in English treated Dalits in their creativity. Taking Mulk Raj Anand's famous novel, *Untouchable* for detailed analysis the essay raises questions, such as, how do the progressive writers like Mulk Raj Anand treat caste as fictional subject? Why is it so important to talk about caste and untouchability in the first half of the twentieth century?, etc.

*Keywords:* Caste, untouchable, progressive, Indian writing in English

The so-called Indian Renaissance in the nineteenth century was characterized by a reform movement that attempted to rid society of its old orthodoxies regarding caste, class and gender. Women's education, widow re-marriage, equality before God were some of the issues taken up by the leaders in different parts of the country. Yet strangely enough in the creative literature of that period the low caste people and the outcastes are virtually invisible. Because education was not available to them, they formed no part of the readership. And since caste Hindu life had been organized to keep them at the peripheries, they did not figure in the Indian language novels about social and domestic life that began to be written in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The situation was not very different in the early decades of the twentieth century. Except for a Telugu novel *Mala Palli* (1921) by Unnava Lakshminarayana which is said to deal with the Malas, an untouchable community of Andhra Pradesh no novelist in India seems



to have focused on the large section of the dispossessed and exploited people. Premchand's novel *Rangbhumi*, (Hindi: 1925) was the next attempt made by an Indian writer to write about caste and untouchability questions. Though Sivarama Karanth's *Chomanadudi* (Kannada: 1933) is another attempt to depict the life of an untouchable family, its English translation was not available till 1978. From that point of view Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) seems to be a pioneering attempt to give visibility to the silent and shadowy community who maintain cleanliness and health of the upper caste people. After him Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Scavenger's Son* (Malayalam: 1948), Gopinath Mohanty's *Harijan* (Odia: 1948), U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* (Kannada:1965) and *Bharathipura* (Kannada:1973), Shanta Rajeswar Rao's *Children of God* (English:1976), Romen Basu's *Outcast* (English:1986), Bonomali Goswami's *Untouchables: A Novel* (English:1994), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (English:1995), Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* (English:1997), Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* (2010) are some Indian novels where Dalits are the central characters. In recent years, however, we have a new perspective on the lives of the lower castes in the literature written by these exploited people themselves which is collectively known as Dalit Literature. The present paper looks into how Indian upper caste writers who were privileged to write in English treated Dalits in their creativity. Taking Mulk Raj Anand's famous novel, *Untouchable* for detailed analysis several questions will be raised in the essay, such as, how do the progressive writers like Mulk Raj Anand treat caste as fictional subject? Why is it so important to talk about caste and untouchability in the first half of the twentieth century? What was Mulk Raj Anand's perspective as a progressive writer to bring an end to caste exploitation in Indian society? These and many other questions will be asked throughout the essay. But before we discuss the novel at length it is important to understand the primacy of caste and its off-shoot untouchability.

### Caste and Untouchability

The ancient dharma sastras (religious texts) of the Hindus not only defended the institution of Varnashrama, but also imposed a series of social, political economic and religious restrictions in the lower castes making the untouchables completely dependent on those above them. They were relegated only to menial occupations. They lived outside the village and fed on the left-overs of the high caste people. Physical contact with untouchables was said to be "polluting" and worse still, even their shadows were considered defiling. Even in the early part of this century reports are coming that the untouchables have no access to public facilities, such as wells, rivers, schools, roads, markets, post offices and courts. Even for a basic necessity like water they are helplessly dependent on the good will of the higher castes. They are denied entry into temples and rest houses and shrines connected to temples are also beyond their reach. Comforts such as riding on horseback, use of bicycles, the use of palanquins and goods connected with luxury such as umbrellas, foot wear, gold and silver ornaments, etc. are forbidden for them.<sup>1</sup> The most perverted practice of untouchability was that which at one time compelled the untouchables to tie an earthen pot around their neck so that their sputum should not fall to the earth and pollute it. Another was the compulsion to tie a broom behind them so that their foot prints would be erased before others set their eyes on them.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the untouchables lived a life full of physical degradation, insults and mental humiliation. The few writers who attempted to portray their lives tended to be driven either by their zeal for social reform or by sentimental compassion. Rarely did a writer

take up an untouchable character and treated him realistically like an ordinary human being full of vitality, hope as well as despair and perplexity. Mulk Raj Anand is important because he attempted precisely this.

That this attempt should be made by an Indian who writes in English is also a fact worth noticing. It may well be that this new branch of the Indian novel, not being burdened with an existing tradition, could strike out in new directions, and deal with themes customarily not considered 'literary'. It is also possible that English not being the language of daily use at that level of society, helped to distance the writer from his material, and in any case the word 'untouchable' was much more sanitized and free of stigma than any of its Indian language equivalents.

### Indian Novels in English

The Indian novel in English is a relatively new phenomenon which gathered momentum only in the twentieth century. The three major writers who emerged in the thirties are Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan. India, as Jawaharlal Nehru has observed in *The Discovery of India* (1946) does not have a monolithic culture. The writings of these three writers give us glimpses of three different orders of social reality. Raja Rao began his writings with the exploration of the freedom struggle and the influence of Gandhi in a village of Karnataka in *Kanthapura* (1938). Some of the characters in this novel are untouchables who join the Gandhian movement, but they are seen from the perspective of a sympathetic Brahmin widow, who is the narrator.

All the later works of Raja Rao highlight the Sanskrit and Brahmanic heritage of the past and the present. Mulk Raj Anand writes about just the other face of the same world - he focuses on the wrongs that were perpetrated by the so called great tradition. R. K. Narayan stays somewhere in between, concentrating on the middle class and their ordinary preoccupations in a place that is neither rural nor metropolitan.

Mulk Raj Anand is a prolific writer and has written a large number of novels and short stories. Other than imaginative fiction, his books cover a whole range of subjects - from Indian curries to Hindu view of art. This breadth of interest makes him unusual among Indian novelists.

Right from the beginning of his writing career, Anand is known for his concern with social injustice. He deals with the working classes and underdogs of the society and often he gives them a central place in his creative work. In this connection Srinivasa Iyenger writes of Anand, "In writing of the pariahs and the bottom dogs rather than of the elites and the sophisticated, Anand had ventured into a territory that had been largely ignored till then by Indian writers."<sup>3</sup> Elena J. Kallinnikove writes that, "Anand believes neither in Shiva, nor in Jesus Christ, but in ordinary man. It is precisely a simple toiler whom Anand praises in his works."<sup>4</sup> The very titles of his works testify to this fact: *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *The Village*, *The Barber's Trade Union*, etc.

In his first novel *Untouchable* (1935), Anand deals with exploitation based on caste. He shows here an untouchable family that has been inhumanly deprived of all the basic social necessities of living. While the novel examines the nature of the degradation imposed on the lower castes by the caste Hindus, it also expresses the upper caste's hypocrisy and double standards. The novel will be discussed in detail later.

In his next novel *Coolie* (1936), Anand analyses the problem of oppression in terms of class. The protagonist, Munno, though he belongs to a higher caste, undergoes a lot of suffering due to poverty. In the novel Munno declares, "Castes did not matter. I am a

Kshatriya and I am poor, and Verma, a Brahmin, is servant boy, a menial, because he is poor. No! Caste does not matter....There must only be two kinds of people in the world: the rich and the poor.”<sup>5</sup>

The next novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) deals with the miseries of the migrant labourers in a Tea Estate, who are displaced, exploited and victimized. This was a subsidiary thread in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* also, where the Skeffington Coffee Estate served as the opposite of the agrarian village Kanthapura, one a conglomeration of rootless workers, and the other an organic community, hierarchical but human. In Anand's novel *Gangu*, a worker of the tea garden is shot dead while rescuing his daughter from the physical assault of the supervisor of the plantation.

Thereafter Anand wrote a trilogy: *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940) and *The Sword and the Sickles* (1942). All three novels trace the growth and experience of a Sikh peasant boy, Lalu Singh. Lalu is a child in the first book and grows to be a young man in the second. In the third novel, he graduates into manhood and travels outside the country as a soldier. On his return he becomes politically conscious and fights against the injustice done to the entire peasant community. In these three novels Anand shows the longing of an individual for a free world.

Anand's next novel, *The Big Heart* (1945) portrays the marginalization of the village artisan with the onset of industrialization. The setting up of factory poses a big threat to the lives of the coppersmiths. In the ensuing battle between the industrialists and Ananta, the rebel leader championing the cause of coppersmiths, Ananta meets with death at the end of the novel.

Anand returns to the problem of untouchability twenty five years later in his novel *The Road* (1961). The recurrence of the theme in Anand's works points to its perennial significance especially because it involves a large section of Indian populace to whose condition India's attainment of independence has made little difference. Though Bhikhu, the protagonist of *The Road* is a road worker and not a sweeper as Bakha is in *Untouchable*, his condition is no different from Bakha's which the novel *The Road* purports to emphasize. What is significant in the novel is that it views Bhikhu's situation as expressive of the chronic malaise with which Indian society is stricken - a malaise which makes it difficult for him to survive with dignity and with unimpaired self-esteem. Bhikhu has to contend with the ideology of a power structure which tends to perpetuate itself through the maintenance of the status quo. That is the reason why despite his resentment and attempt to seek expression for his rebellious spirit he finds himself fighting a losing battle. The road becomes the central issue with which the protagonist has to contend.

Thus, in Anand's tension-ridden world we always see a struggle for social justice going on although the attempts at resistance are not always successful. We also see the traditional Hindu society being posited as the enemy of the lower castes. In Anand's rural novels the villains are several: the high caste Brahmin or the priest, the landlord and the moneylender, all of whom squeeze the poor peasant or worker to the utmost. Even if Anand cannot show the underdog winning his battle - it would indeed be unrealistic to portray such a victory - by giving us his perspective of the struggle, he imbues these mute victim figures with dignity. In this venture, Mulk Raj Anand has more in common with the first generation of African writers in English like Chinua Achebe who wrote to restore the dignity of his people, reminding them that their past was not one long period of darkness critically exploring the strengths and weakness of his culture. Writing with the same purpose, Anand as a critical insider examines the darker aspects of his own

society. He does not offer a cure for the disease, he merely diagnoses, hoping to raise consciousness about a situation most people in India tend to take for granted. Chekov once wrote in a letter "between the solution of the question and the correct setting of a question, the latter alone is obligatory for the artist".<sup>6</sup> It is with this view that we have to look at Anand's famous novel *Untouchable*.

### **The Making of the Novel *Untouchable***

Anand in his "Afterword" tells us how his novel *Untouchable* came to be written and how it acquired its present shape. "I could not have started off writing my first book, *Untouchable*, if I had not noticed your own sympathy for the outcastes of India in your famous book", writes Anand in a tribute to his revered friend E.M. Foster. And we know from Forster's "preface" to *Untouchable* that this "famous book" is certainly no other than *The Passage to India*. Anand does not elaborate on this further, but as readers of *A Passage to India* we feel that Anand may be thinking of the centrality given to the pankhawala in *A Passage to India*:

"Almost naked, and splendidly formed ... he had strength and beauty that sometimes come to flower in Indians of low birth. When that strange race rears the dust and is condemned as untouchable, then nature remembers the physical perfection that she accomplished elsewhere, and throws out a god - not many, but one here and there, to prove to society how little its categories impressed her".<sup>7</sup>

Anand learnt from James Joyce "the stream of consciousness" and the literary techniques, as he himself confesses. Further, the plays of the Irish writers which dealt with peasants, fishermen and slum dwellers also helped Anand. Another great influence on Anand was Mahatma Gandhi whose "editing (and) censoring" gave the novel its final shape. In recognition of this, in later editions Anand dedicates the novel to Gandhi also.

Anand had read the story of the sweeper boy Ukha, written by Gandhi in *Young India*. Anand's hero Bakha, his father Lakha, and his brother Rakha seem to derive their names from the historical Ukha, an untouchable boy serving in the household of Gandhi.<sup>8</sup> This is perhaps, the reason why Anand wanted to show the manuscript of the *Untouchable* to Gandhi, but when he came back from England, a different experience awaited him at Gandhi's ashram. Gandhi would not entertain Anand in his ashram until the latter took three vows: not to look at women with desire, not to drink alcohol in the ashram and to clean latrines once a week. Within three months of staying there and practising the vows he had taken, Anand developed a new approach to life. He writes, "I found myself being converted to some sincerity, simplicity and truth and to the love of people". Gandhi suggested that from his manuscript Anand should cut the high sounding passages, the comic and tragic motifs, a deliberated attempt by which the novelist had made a few scenes melodramatic. Thus, the two hundred and fifty pages of the original manuscript was reduced to just a hundred and fifty, the present novel.

### ***Untouchable*: A Critical Reading**

The novel *Untouchable* opens with the description of the outcaste colony which is located at the fringes of the town Bulandshahar and at a considerable distance from the caste Hindu settlements. This reminds us of the description of the similar situation in Sivarama Karanth's Kannada novel *Chomanadudi* (translated into English as *Choma's Drum* by U. K. Kalkur in 1978) where Choma's hut stands in solitary seclusion at the edge of the forest,

because he is a Holey, an untouchable by birth. The untouchables' quarters are situated outside the village all over India even now because they are considered "polluting". The untouchables live in huts made of mud walls just like the "slumblings and rickety hovels" of the coppersmiths in another novel by Anand *The Big Heart*. The surroundings of the outcaste colony are filthy because the civic amenities are not extended to the untouchables. Anand describes, "There are no drains, no lights, no waters of the marsh and where people live among the latrines of the townsmen, and in the stink of their own dung scattered about here, there and everywhere; of the world where the day is dark as the night and the night pitch-dark."<sup>9</sup> There live the scavengers, leather workers, washer men, barbers, water carrier, and grass-cutters - all are untouchables and they live in miserable and sub-human conditions.

Bakha, the hero of *Untouchable* is born and brought up in these surroundings. Lakha, his father is the Jemadar of all the sweepers in the town and in the cantonment. By profession, they do all the cleaning work in the town and in the cantonment. Socially deprived as they are, they also remain economically poor. Their meagre earnings make them dependent on the upper caste people for their basic need such as food, clothes etc.

Anand gives Bakha, a young man of eighteen, a strong and supple body almost like Forster's pankhawala thereby making him mythical as well as real. Because the lower class people do hard physical labour, their bodies are muscular when young, and bony when old. Anand chooses as his hero an adolescent - a boy at the threshold of manhood - so that he can depict both his childish playfulness, as well as the stirrings of adult passion and questioning.

The novel covers one day - from morning till evening. In this period, Anand presents the various ugly manifestations of the caste system and exposes the hypocrisies of the orthodox Hindu society. By using this narrative device of collapsing many experience within a limited time span, Anand packs his novel with events and introspection. On this crucial day Bakha encounters different forms of discrimination and wakes up, as it were, from an unthinking boyhood when he had taken all his suffering passively as his fate, to a self-reflexive state of manhood.

Everyday Bakha starts his duty much before the day begins. Sleepily and shivering in the cold he starts cleaning the latrines. Daily he has to clean three rows of latrines repeatedly. He is responsible for bringing cleanliness to a place that would otherwise remain filthy and possibly breed diseases. Bakha is an efficient worker who works quickly and earnestly. When he works, "Each muscle of his body, hard as a rock when it came into play, seemed to shine forth like glass,....What a dexterous work man the onlooker would have said. And though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean".<sup>10</sup> Anand writes.

The physical description of Bakha is realistic no doubt, but not untinged by a slight romanticization. This heightening is deliberately done because Anand wants to positively focus on the human potential of the boy. The description reminds us of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Anand is an Indian and Achebe a Nigerian, but both the novelists are writing about a people who were looked down upon and not considered as human beings by the ruling class and the novels want to emphasize and generate their own self-esteem. By remarking, what a dexterous workers the onlooker would have said - Anand reminds us of the attractiveness of hard work and a well - made body. This sentence cannot be taken as a simple realistic statement. It has a lot of complex resonances for a society divided on caste lines. Here the novelist is showing his upper caste readers that beauty is not dependent on its surroundings, that work itself is beautiful.

We also know through his hockey hero Havildar Charat Singh that Bakha plays hockey well. Bakha proves this later in the day when he scores a goal for his team against the 31st Punjabis. Anand uses the motif of game effectively to show a common denominator that unites persons of unequal age and different castes. Also we already know of Bakha's excellent body. That he should be skilful in sports follows naturally.

In spite of the talent Bakha has, he does not get a proper chance to develop his sportsmanship due to his poor socio-economic conditions. Bakha's servility when he salutes Charat Singh in the hope of getting a hockey stick is something the author wants us to be disturbed about. Instead of demanding from the world what is his due, Bakha seems to be overly grateful for small favours:

It is due to the trait of servility in Bakha which he had inherited from his forefathers: the weakness of the downtrodden, the helpless of the poor and the indigent sullenly receiving help, the passive contentment of the bottom dog suddenly illuminated by the prospect of fulfillment of a secret and a long cherished desire.<sup>11</sup>

Anand's anger seems to come from the individualistic tradition of Western civilization, rather than from the hierarchical tradition of Hindu society to which he himself belongs. It is possible that his prolonged stay in England where the society is relatively more egalitarian made Anand more sensitive to these issues of inequality which most other Indians passively accept.

Just as within any upper caste there are innumerable castes and sub-castes, so the lower castes are also graded in many layers. Those who are slightly high in this hierarchy look down on the others who are supposed to be inferior to them. When Sohini, Bakha's sister, comes to the well, she is naturally snubbed by Gulabo, a washer woman. Even later we find among Bakha's playmates there is a subtle but sure distinction among the subdivisions of the untouchable community.

The appearance of the priest, Pandit Kali Nath on the scene brings hope for the untouchables who are waiting for a "kind hearted Hindu" to come to give them water from the well. It is to be remembered that untouchables are not permitted to draw the water from the caste Hindus' well for the fear of "pollution". Pandit Kali Nath draws water for physical exercise more than as an act of generosity. More despicable still is his voyeuristic appreciation for Sohini:

The fresh young from whose full breasts with their dark beads of nipples stood out conspicuously under her muslin shirt, whose innocent look of wonder seemed to stir the only soft chord in his person, hardened by the congenital weakness of his mind, brazened by the authority he exercised over the faithful and the devout. And he was inclined to be kind to her.<sup>12</sup>

The physical description of Sohini parallels Bakha's in the sense that both are realistic as well as exotic. Although degraded socially, both of them are physically attractive. In Anand's portrayal of Sohini there is also a hidden agenda. Anand gives the readers an impression that Sohini is almost nude. He does this deliberately to draw our attention to a naked truth: the impoverishment of the untouchable. In other words, Sohini's poverty is her nakedness.

Pandit Kali Nath takes advantage of his caste and later in the day tries to molest Sohini in the temple yard. And when she screams, he comes out shouting that he has been defiled. This is not just a caricature of a lecherous Brahmin priest taking advantage of his status; it raises questions about the logic of "pollution" also. In this connection C.D. Narasimhaiah comments:

We are now shown brother and sister suffering ignominy and shame, with the lie not in their hearts but in those who pretended to keep the truth of God, His abode and themselves in pristine purity. The untouchables, Anand's art has made us to see, are not Bakha and his sister, but those others who called them so.<sup>13</sup>

Sohini is not the only untouchable girl in literature to be shown as a victim of the lust of the higher castes. Similar examples could be cited from Sivarama Karanth's *Chomanadudi*, Gopinath Mohanty's *Harijan*, U. K. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* (Kannada; 1965) and many others. In all the above mentioned novels the caste Hindu men either molested or raped the untouchable women exploiting their helpless socio-economic conditions. It is as if chastity is important only for the upper caste and upper class women. Sexual exploitation and economic exploitation are often carried on simultaneously.

Anand takes us to the market area of the town with Bakha just to show us another face of caste discrimination. Here the novelist draws our attention to Bakha's taste: he smokes "Red Lamp" cigarettes and loves to eat jalebis. Earlier we have been shown how he likes the clothes of the Sahebs. Bakha's wishes and aspirations are as human as anyone else's. Bakha's desire for foreign clothes and aspiration for learning English could signify his vague hankering for a different way of life. He has the normal urges of a teenager, wanting to taste good food, smoke and play games. Anand here could also be countering the misapprehensions about the untouchables: they eat carcass, live in unhygienic condition and wear dirty clothes by their own choice. One recalls the prejudices of Moorthy in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* when he entered an untouchable home for the first time. Even though intellectually he had stopped believing in caste, instinctively he recoiled from drinking water because he imagined a stench coming from the backyard of Rachama's house.

The untouchables provided the caste Hindus with their labour doing all sorts of menial jobs and getting paid in cash and kind. We see Bakha in the market spending the little cash he had earned. When Bakha goes to the silversmith's gully we see him getting paid in food. The Hindu community fed the untouchables, but the food they offered was fit for the dustbin. Rakha, Bakha's brother has collected the food which is "full of broken pieces of chapattis, some whole ones and lentil curry in a bowl". It becomes clear to the readers that if untouchables eat leftovers, it is because they have no option. They cannot till land and produce their own food, nor can they earn enough to buy raw material for cooking at home.

The dietary world of the untouchable has been explored by other writers also. In some places the untouchables have been shown as eating dead animals. Sivarama Karanth in his novel *Chomanadudi* presents the eponymous hero fondly eating the meat of a dead buffalo. When the peasant announces to Choma the death of his she-buffalo, Choma is supposed to have jumped and danced with joy anticipating a feast. Karanth writes, "Inwardly very happy, Choma pretended lack of interest."<sup>14</sup> The scene obviously projects the biased view of a caste Hindu novelist. Karanth fails to see the truth that the untouchables do not eat carcasses out of their choice but to live and survive when there is absolutely no other way of getting their food.

Another writer of this century Sivasankara Pillai in his novel *Scavenger's Son* not only condemns the upper caste prejudice that "A scavenger who cleaned up dirt was compelled to eat dirt"<sup>15</sup> but also clarifies the overt statements through his character Chudalamuttu. Chudalamuttu, though a scavenger does not allow his son, Mohan to do scavenging duty. Instead he sends him to school and hopes that his son will not be a scavenger. Contrary to Chudalamuttu's belief the upper castes people treat Mohan as a scavenger in spite of his cleanliness, education etc. This enrages Chudalamuttu and he reveals himself:

It seemed to Chudalamuttu that he should take a pot with him in the morning. Everything he got from the house the previous day's mouldy payasam or the water, the rice had been washed in, or the stale porridge; all this he should put in the pot, set it on the muck cart and bring it back to give to the child. That was the way he should grow up. A scavenger's child could not grow up without eating that dirt. Even if he did not give it to the child, the child would want it. That dirt was something a scavenger's child found more tasty than biscuits. For a relish for that sort of thing was inherited.<sup>16</sup>

The recently available Dalit Literature counters such bias seen in the writing of even sympathetic upper caste writers like Shivaram Karanth when they are writing about untouchables. Bandu Madhava's powerful Marathi short story "The Poisoned Bread" (1992) makes a telling point about food, especially about the age-old and dehumanizing tradition of collecting food from the upper castes, which makes them slaves forever. As the story goes, Yetalya, an old Mahar is driven away from his duty by Bapu Patil without any payment for his day-long labour. For his survival, Yetalya has to collect the stale crumbs smeared with dung and urine left by the oxen of Bapu Patil. The old man dies after eating these crumbs. Before his death he makes a statement urging all the untouchables of the land to give up the old habit of eating leftover food and to educate themselves as much as possible to fight against exploitation. Using bread as the metaphor for physical as well as psychic degradation he says: "never depend on the age-old bread associated with our caste. Get as much education as you can. Take away this accursed bread from the mouths of the Mahars. This poisonous bread will finally kill the very humanness of man".<sup>17</sup>

Through repeated humiliation Bakha becomes conscious of the injustice on which his entire life is based. There is this moment of truth when he broods alone, and after that can no longer accept his fate like his father or even his brother. The end of the novel *Untouchable* brings Bakha in contact with people who offer him solutions to his problem. The British clergyman of the town - Hutchinson, Mahatma Gandhi and the poet Iqbal Nath Sarashar - the three offer him their sympathies and suggestions for the eradication of the discriminatory system of untouchability.

The Padre's abstract Christian discourse fully studded with biblical quotations does not interest or convince Bakha because both the rhetoric and ideas are alien to him. Moreover we feel the author himself is reluctant to give this solution the importance it deserves since the representation of the wife of the missionary borders on caricature. Her angry outburst on "dirty bhangis and chamars" can undo all the kind words of Mr. Hutchinson and exposes their unreality. Mary Hutchinson's tirade drives Bakha away. Anand reduces Bakha's attraction for the Padre to a matter of two old trousers which Bakha longed to get from him. In Sivrama Karanth's *Chomanadudi*, like Bakha the hero is confronted with Christianity as a solution to his misery. Conversion might have solved his immediate problems, but he rejects Christianity for very personal reasons of faith and identity, even though he cannot articulate his stand properly. Anand thus is not alone among the Hindu upper caste writers who oppose casteism and conversion in the same breath.<sup>18</sup>

Anand seems to bring in Gandhi's visit to Bulandshahar as a climatic event in the novel only because of his (Gandhi's) sympathies for the untouchables. The dividing line between the "real Gandhi" and "fictitious Gandhi" is very thin. Even Anand had to quote some lines from real Gandhi's speech on untouchability in his fiction (for example, "I regard (the) untouchable as the greatest blot on Hinduism and so on."<sup>19</sup>) to make his point clearer.



The preaching of the fictional Gandhi in this novel that untouchables should realize that a Bhangi should remain a Bhangi for ever and not aspire to be anything else. He also says that untouchability is not just a social question but a moral and religious one. This corresponds to the belief of the historic Gandhi indirectly supported Varanshrama Dharma. Bhiku Parekh's comment on this is relevant here: "By taking a narrowly religious view of untouchability, Gandhi not only reinforced harijan passivity but also betrayed his own profound political insight that no system of oppression could be ended without the active involvement and consequent political education and organization of its victims."<sup>20</sup>

But Anand's portrayal of the Hindu society and the practice of untouchability are very different from Gandhi's understanding of the problem. Anand's socialistic and materialistic understanding of the situation interrogates Gandhi's religious and moral stand on untouchability. Calling the untouchable 'Harijan' Gandhi made them into the children of god, but acknowledged their separateness nevertheless. Anand presents, to a certain extent, both Gandhi and the padre as mystics, because they both talk of ignorance and sin rather than of economic and social inequity.

Bakha at the end of the day hears about a machine which has the potential to liberate him from the manual task of carrying filth. This captures his imagination and lingers in his mind as he starts towards his home. The fact that he receives this information from a poet is also significant. Anand seems to be suggesting that the technology that would give him freedom is part of the futuristic vision of the poet of a new era. The first option, Christianity, is not for a moment considered seriously by Bakha. The two things that remain in his mind are: Gandhi and the machine. He dreams of the future and wants to share the dream with his family from whom he had felt estranged earlier in the day.

## Conclusion

*Untouchable* is an open-ended novel and not a novel like *Scavenger's Son* which ends in scavengers forming a union. Through this well-organized union the scavengers of Alleppey in *Scavenger's Son* have learnt to speak with a united voice. The result is, "Today's scavenger knows how much he earns; he has also learnt to get change for his money without getting cheated. He even has the nerve to want more wages...."<sup>21</sup> Apart from this, Pillai gives the scavengers of Alleppey human dignity. To quote him,

There is a widespread complaint that scavengers are insolent. If you try to substantiate that complaint, you will get the answer that they are indeed insolent ..... you should see the way he walks in the evening ! He uses talcum powder, he wears a jubba, he smokes cigarettes he is not subservient .... The Alleppey scavenger has learnt quite a bit. He knows how to think on the basis of what he knows and so get to know more. So he behaves as one lost in thought. He has realized that a scavenger is a human being.<sup>22</sup>

While Anand explores in *Untouchable* the humiliations and frustrations of an adolescent whose only sin is that he is born in a sweeper family, he does not offer a neat solution to Bakha's problem. The novel was written at a time when even legal or constitutional measures had not been taken to correct the social inequality in India, and the writer himself was not sure in which direction a future solution might lie. Today, after nearly a century we know that mere changes in the legal system do not transform the values of society. Of the three possibilities suggested at the end of *Untouchable* Anand's outright rejection of Christianity can be seen in his mocking attitude to the Hutchinson. Gandhi's

words are emotionally soothing to Bakha, but the real change in the material condition of a scavenger, Anand seems to suggest, can be brought about by technological innovation that will free him from the degradation of manually carrying other people excrement. This fits in with his progressive ideology and faith in human progress achieved through reason and science.

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- Anand's rejection of conversion as a way out of the treat of untouchability can be seen as a part of the third world novelist's attempt to build the hegemony of the West and to evolve what Makarand Paranjape calls 'the contestatory model of the third world novel'. Karanth's fiction can also be read profitably from such a perspective. See Makarand Paranjape, "The Ideology of Form: Notes on the Third World Novel", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. XXVI, No. 1 1991.
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# English Language and Transnational Networks: A Study of Colonial Punjab

ARTI MINOCHA

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**Abstract:** The journey of English language in India has been variously assessed through tropes of mimicry, agency, resistance, and linguistic hybridity. While these critical assessments are largely placed within local, provincial, and national frameworks, this essay argues for a transnational critical framework to understand the history of English in India. The development of transnational publics at the end of the nineteenth century was facilitated by travel, print networks, and cultural flows between the colonies and the metropole. While English embedded itself into local literary cultures, it was also deployed by colonial subjects in transnational imperial circuits, thus influencing political imaginaries and subjectivities. The essay analyses archival records from the colonial Province of Punjab to see how English was mobilized to project newer identities into transnational print publics and to build transnational networks of solidarity. The essay also examines how the claims made over English help to understand the agency of the gendered colonial subject.

**Keywords:** English education, transnational publics, colonial languages, women's subjectivity, linguistic hybridity.

## Introduction

The trajectory of English language and literature in India has traversed a long way since its active contact with the region at least five centuries ago. Many critical formulations and theorisations, from both western and non-western academia, have attempted to deal with the political and cultural ramifications of the sustained power of "World Englishes" (Huddart). The initial impetus to the introduction of the English language and its literature in higher education in India was formally given by Charles Wood's Education Despatch of 1854 that sought to benignly offer "European knowledge" to lift the country out of darkness and "rouse them to emulate us in the development of the vast resources of the country" (Wood). Works such as Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* (1990) have discussed this English education and the institutionalisation of English Literature as important to British socio-political control over India. Postcolonial critical assessments of this project of "linguistic imperialism" (Phillipson) and producing 'mimic men' through language have moved on to the crucial question of the 'agency' of the colonised subject.

The question of the 'authenticity' or 'mimicry' of colonial subjects has been an important one that studies on colonial subjectivity have dealt with. Many studies have assumed that indigenous cultures were so impacted by the hegemonic ideas of nationalism, liberalism, and the public sphere that any native response could only have been a

"derivative discourse".<sup>1</sup> Commenting on the "empire of English", Phillipson underscores the need to break out of a "centre-periphery framework" in studying World Englishes and suggests a "linguistic hybridization" as the locus of agency of the colonial subject (133). Homi Bhabha (1994) similarly argues that mimicry opens up multiple spaces for hybridity and subversion of the master discourse. While 'mimicry' has been a frequent trope through which subject-formation, especially that of the westernised elite has been studied, political agency has also been described through the vocabulary of "resistance", "collaboration", "cosmopolitanism", "hybridity", "sly civility", and "camouflage" (Bhabha 162; Dharwadker 114).

While the colonial and postcolonial journey of English has been understood through these tropes of linguistic agency/mimicry largely in local or national contexts, this essay discusses the deployment of English by colonial subjects in their attempt to develop transnational publics across boundaries of provinces, regions, and nations. This is done through a study of the print archives of the colonial Province of Punjab, a region that was a site of bitter language contestations in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. A transnational framework helps to understand the history of English in India as related not only to local or national debates but also as part of a larger imperial circuitry.

Studies of the reception of the English language in India show that the language was not only a unidirectional imposition by the coloniser over the colonised, but also a terrain of contestation which different sets of people claimed and appropriated at different points of time. For example, claim over the English language by colonial authorities as well as the reform elite of nineteenth century Punjab became a mode of sharing patriarchal control over middle-class women. Thus, the reform patriarchies (the Arya Samaj and Singh Sabha) advocated women's education through vernacular languages for fear of cultural invasion through English education. Conversely, the demand for an English education became one of the modes of articulation of self-fashioning for middle-class women in Punjab. Thus, "languages and ideologies are 'multi-accentual'" (Loomba 28), and it is this complex cultural field of English that the essay seeks to unravel.

The first part of this essay examines how English, and the print sphere that the language generated, was localised, translated, and appropriated into scriptural and oral cultures of Punjab, and how it was mobilised to project newer identities into transnational print publics and build transnational networks of solidarity. The second part of the paper examines women's enunciations of self-identities through English writing, and their demands for English education despite denial by both colonial authorities and reform patriarchies. The overarching argument of both parts is that the reception of English was tied to multiple axes, and it is in the claims made over it that the agency of the colonial subject can be located. The trajectory of English is, thus, interconnected with histories of print technology, transnational political networks, commerce, literary cultures, and gender constructions.

### **English as a Language of Transnational Publics**

The development of transnational publics and critical methodologies to analyse them have been important fields of scholarly enquiry in Postcolonial Studies in the past few years. Transnational history of ideas is an important and expansive field that grounds identity formation in the processes of exchange, circulation, and reception of political ideas. Travel, commercial publishing, print networks, and cultural flows between the colonies and the imperial centre mutually influenced each other to produce related

histories so that the binaries of domestic and imperial histories are rendered inadequate. "Remaking the cultural geographies of empire has also involved mapping the larger networks, institutions, and exchanges that integrated the empire... cultural traffic that wove colonies together into imperial systems as well as linking colonies to the imperial center" (Ballantyne and Burton 417). Thus, a transnational perspective would be useful in understanding the trajectory of English in colonial India. "Connected histories" (Subrahmanyam 2) take into account circuits of movement of people, ideas, languages, commodities, networks and "cultural flows" (Appadurai and Breckenridge 10), rather than treat colonial histories as a unidirectional flow from the metropole to the colony. Thus, what would be interesting in the development of English in colonial India is not only how it met with local cultural, literary, and linguistic practices but also how it facilitated global networks and "imperial circuits" (Finkelstein 153). Moreover, English was also actively mobilised to project newer identities into transnational print publics, as stated above. The story of English in colonial Indian contexts is, therefore, a complex phenomenon and needs to take into account mutual influences, power relationships inherent in cross-cultural encounters, local practices, literary markets across borders, and specificities of location as well as transnational networks.

Commercial printing and literary tastes in nineteenth century Punjab evolved specifically in relation to local genres, and oral and performative practices and display specific regional complexities, yet it would be useful to see trans-local connections in the evolution of genres like the novel, travel writing, and periodicals in vernacular languages as well. English and vernacular languages were mutually implicated in the development of each other and the experimentation with modern genres as well. Sisir Kumar Das' compendium, *A History of Indian Literature*, published in two volumes in 1991 looks at the development of modern languages and genres that evolved "in response to a new set of intellectual, social and economic requirements" (Das 73) during the colonial period through three phases of "production of pedagogical materials, socio-religious debates and journalism" (Das 75).

Transnational perspectives also allow an examination of the evolution of genres in response to multiple inflections beyond the binaries of 'tradition' and 'influence'. For example, Waetjen and Vahed provide interesting examples of new genres, such as the "cutting" that evolved in response to transnational audiences in the Indian Ocean public sphere. Since a network of correspondents and wire services would be expensive, newspapers and journals would publish cuttings from other sources with acknowledgements. For example, an edition of *Indian Opinion*, a newspaper started by Gandhi in South Africa in 1903 would feature cuttings from the *Rangoon Times*, *The Zanzibar Chronicle*, the *Bombay Reporter* and the Madras-based *Indian Review*. The circuitry of ideas in such genres would mutually influence political imaginaries and ideas of political subjectivity in India and South Africa, and English became the mode of such imaginaries.

Readership patterns and vernacular publishing in Punjab were complicated by competitive politics between languages, the designation of Urdu as the official vernacular, and the identification of Punjabi, Hindi, and Urdu as languages of Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims respectively by reform organisations. The reform organisations tried to solidify the one-language, one-community formula, especially in so far as prescribed languages for women were concerned. However, the multi-linguality of the print sphere and the translation activity, as far as reading material for women is concerned, tell another story.

While languages of print were used to mediate gender and religious identities and demarcate them from each other, these borders between languages and identities were crossed and appropriated by historical actors to suit their own needs and competencies.

The traffic between English printed materials in India and other locations in the world in the colonial period can be gleaned from recent research in transnational print cultures, as also from archival sources on Punjab. In the context of Punjab, oral histories and written accounts of travellers from Punjab to the West, sometimes published in England, records of Indian publications or publications about India sold in England, booklists of foreign publishers such as Macmillan with India-specific titles, autobiographical records and communication of foreign publishers with authors in India, records of social and print networks in locations in India and outside, missionary records, and records of 'inflammatory' material sent by international post intercepted and proscribed by the Punjab government, provide a huge array of materials that show a mutual rewriting of identities in colonial locations as well as imperial centres that was happening through English.

The print sphere in colonial India was "a battlefield where voices strain to be heard, economics and commerce conspire with the needs of self-expression" (Pollock 105). This tussle for economic and commercial viability in the colonial print sphere was played out not only between local actors but also in a field of increasing transnational presence. British publishers found tremendous potential in Indian markets and responded to the commercial challenges from local publishers through strategic marketing policies and introduction of special colonial or imperial library series (for example, the Macmillan Colonial Library Series of 1886). Publishing houses such as Longman, Macmillan, Allen and Unwin, Trubner, and Thacker and Spink had a history of trade links with India by the second half of the nineteenth century, selling text books for schools and books for English readership.<sup>2</sup> Stanley Unwin's autobiographical record describes his fascination with India and the growing readership here as he visited dominion countries in 1912. He describes India as "one of the best investments" he ever made (Unwin 112-13). The success of A.H. Wheeler's Indian Railway Library or 'one-rupee railway library' books, sold at bookstalls at railway stations yet again proves expanding Indian readership of English texts.<sup>3</sup>

Records show that special colonial imprints by foreign publishers also made available literary works written by women. Bell's Indian and Colonial Library of Standard Literature and Fiction brought out works by Mrs Oliphant, Mrs Russell Barrington, Mrs Alexander, Violet Hunt, Mrs Hungerford, May Edwood, etc. (mentioned in 1895 *Thacker's Indian Directory*). The evidence of these being read by women comes from the reviews and opinions on these books published in women's periodicals of the time.

Other books catered to women's literary embellishment as well. A book of etiquette titled, *A Guide for Indian Female from Infancy to Old Age: Comprising Manners, Customs, Rules, &c.*, published in English by Nand Lal Ghose (Lahore, 1897) sought to fulfil the need of educated middle class women. Books on the art of letter writing that were published in English and vernacular languages sought to identify linguistic communities with religion, and in the process, create them. Letter writers published in English were models for such books in vernacular languages, for example, *Tahrir un nisa* (Urdu, 1881), "letters illustrative of language and sayings of Muhammadan women of India", *Insha-i-Gurmukhi* (1886) and *Dulhan Patarka* (1895, Amar Press), a letter writer for females by Gyani Hazara Singh, published by the Wazir-i-Hind Press, Amritsar since 1912. Thus, English publications for women influenced vernacular reading material made available to them through translations/ transcreations.

Meanwhile, English publications in the metropole by Indian students and travellers kept up the interest in India. The *Journal of the National Indian Association* (published from 1871-1933 in London which took the title of the *Indian Magazine* in 1886) and the *Indian Mirror* frequently carried articles by writers located in India and Britain. Telegraphic news services ensured that the colonial and the British press fed upon each other. Publications such as *The Journal of Indian Art and Industry*, *the Imperial Gazetteers*, *Blackwood's Magazine*, and the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition and 1888 Glasgow Exhibition that were attended by five and a half million people, introduced a new vocabulary of the visual and the spectacle through which India came to be represented in Britain (Mukherjee 223).

Catalogues in *Trubner's American, European and Oriental Literary Records* published in London record the huge sale of language-teaching Primers in many Indian languages such as Persian, Hindi, Sanskrit, Bengali and Kaithi published in Roman script for Europeans as well as Indian students.<sup>4</sup> Indian travellers and writers who had been published in England in the latter part of the nineteenth century, such as Toru Dutt, Manmohan Ghose, B.M. Malabari, T.B. Pandian, W.C. Bonnerjee, Dadabhai Naoroji and Sarojini Naidu influenced British literary and print culture through their fiction, poetry, and travel writing. Travel accounts from Punjab that allow glimpses into the West through Indian eyes include the writings of Olive Christian Malvery (1906), an Anglo-Indian woman from Lahore, Raja Jagatjit Singh (1895), the Maharani of Kapurthala (1953), and Jhinda Ram (1893).

The traffic of publications from England, America, and other countries on the continent into Punjab, also becomes evident from the records of 'inflammatory' material intercepted by the Punjab Government as Punjab became a volatile battleground in the early twentieth century. These included the Khalsa series of pamphlets, posted in London on 8 January 1909 for India Native Newspapers, copies of the journals *Justice* (from London), *Indian Sociologist* (Paris), *Gaelic American* (New York), *Circular of Freedom*, *Free Hindustan*, *Bande Mataram* (Paris) and Hyndman's pamphlet and other pamphlets and books.<sup>5</sup>

An officer commenting on a pamphlet received in the Guides Regiment asking men in the Indian Army not to serve in the British Government noted that it was printed on linen paper produced in England that was probably printed in America where old-fashioned type press might have been found, and was circulated in a Gujranwalla paper in India.<sup>6</sup> The comment brilliantly records, even metaphorically, the hybrid nature of print activity and mobilization in colonial Punjab. Letters and pamphlets addressed to the students of Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College and Islamia College and the Mission School, Peshawar, lithographed and posted in North West London appealed to Sikhs and Muslims to unite and release their country from economic drain.<sup>7</sup> Reports on literature proscribed under the Indian Press Act 1910 listed not only forfeited local literature but also literature from overseas – the "Gadr di Gunj", a pamphlet in Gurmukhi from San Francisco, the part-German part-English "Pro India", a journal published by the "International Committee Pro India" of Zurich, and "The Hindustanee", published in Vancouver, British Columbia.<sup>8</sup> 'Seditious' Literature received from Paris and London, concealed in catalogues of big Paris firms included *The Gaelic American*, *Indian Sociologist*, *Liberator*, *Bande Mataram*, *Talwar*,<sup>9</sup> *Herald of Revolt*<sup>10</sup> and even proscribed photographs entitled "Aryamata" by R.L. Desai.<sup>11</sup> English print sphere thus became an important "contact zone" (Pratt's term for spaces where disparate cultures meet), both in the material and discursive senses, for transnational impulses and networks to coalesce.

### English as a “Contact Zone” for Women

Meanwhile, increased cultural and social exchanges between British and native women became possible at different sites and ‘contact zones’— within both native and European homes in India, in public spaces, in the metropole, and in the discursive field of English print. Contact between British and native women was feared by religious reformers (of the Arya Samaj and Singh Sabha) as many references in vernacular periodicals for women indicate. The fear of conversion of women into Christianity and English education invading into the cultural space is shown by the titles of many vernacular tracts that ridiculed women’s adoption of the English language, education, clothes, and food.<sup>12</sup>

Women’s periodicals that abound in the vernacular languages in nineteenth century Punjab were mostly initiated by reformist organisations to disseminate ideas about modernity appropriate for women and to consolidate communities around languages. It is in some of these periodicals that women argue for space in the public arena and professions, intervene actively in discussions on the curricula, language, and pedagogy of the education they should get, wrest the initiative to speak on their own behalf, discuss women’s movements and universities across the globe, and imagine a sisterhood.

One of the most significant issues on which these periodicals influenced public discourse was women’s education. *Punjabi Bhain* (1907-18), a monthly in Punjabi published by the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Ferozepur, presented extensive discussions on higher education for women through the example of the Japanese University for Women, and in the process, it contemplated on various implications of curricula, education, and pedagogy used. In view of debates about the language of instruction for women and reform institutions advocating vernacular education for women, it is significant that women strongly demanded education in English in these periodicals. For example, in the June 1916 edition, Gurmukhi is suggested as the language of *dharmik sudhar* (religious improvement), whereas English is suggested as the language of *vyavharik sudhar* (behavioural improvement).

Most provincial governments also rejected the idea of English education for women when financial assistance and scholarships were sought from them. The Education Department files of 1915 report that the Indian Women’s Education Association in England that advised Indian women students in England requested for scholarships for Indian women to be trained as teachers in England. Most provincial governments rejected the idea saying that it was “better to train up girls in courses which include the vernaculars and in the environment in which they will afterwards work, but it is thought in several quarters that training in England will actually unfit the women for work in this country subsequently.” The Punjab government also feared that women who had been trained in England would demand better salaries.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the denial of English education by both reform patriarchies as well as the colonial government was countered by the demands for English education made by middle-class women.

It was also conscious journalistic efforts at connecting middle-class women through journals and periodicals in English, contributions to each-others’ publications and sharing information that linked Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, Kamala Sattthianadhan, Kumudini Mitra (writer and editor of *Suprabhat*, 1907-14, and *Bangalakshmi*, 1925-27) and Madame Cama (associated with European revolutionary circles, the Indian Home Rule Society, and publisher of the English monthly *Bande Mataram* from Paris) in a pan-Indian effort to imagine gendered collectivities.<sup>14</sup> The exclusivity and elitism of such print networks through English language print is evident in Sattthianadhan’s comment on her intended audience:



a considerable number of daughters of India are taking advantage of the opportunities afforded them of a liberal English education, some of them even succeeding in winning University honours. The future of the women of India rests largely with this educated class; and more especially with those belonging to it, who, without losing what is distinctly Indian, have come under the best influences of the West. (Editorial in *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, Vol. 1, July 1901- June 1902)

Another narrative by a woman from Punjab that explores the possibilities of establishing gendered solidarities across national and communitarian borders is a novel titled *Cosmopolitan Hinduani*, perhaps one of the first novels in English written by a woman in Punjab. Published in 1902, in the context of bitter print wars between religious reformers, the novel *Cosmopolitan Hinduani: Depicting Muhammadan and Hindu Life and Thought in Story Form* by Susila Tahl Ram declares its intent of rising beyond the 'narrow' provincial and communal anxieties and identity politics of much of the vernacular literature published at that time in its title by claiming a cosmopolitan outlook. While she claims a cosmopolitan identity, the word "Hinduani" in the title attaches this identity to gender and religion as well, which were important markers of identity at that time. In making a linguistic choice of English language, the author attempts to influence the formation of not only gendered 'vernacular publics' but transnational ones as well and reach beyond the fault lines of religion and caste, and indeed province and nation. That the intended audience is the English-educated within India and abroad, is evident in the care that is taken to translate and explain local words, and literary and folk practices into English.

The author of the novel, Susila Tahl Ram has since remained only as a trace in the notings of the colonial government and not much is known about her life, other than that she certainly wrote and translated school text-books through the Arya Samaj reformist press. Amar Singh, a Rajput nobleman and officer in the Indian army writes in his diary that Susila Tahl Ram was brought up in England but returned and married an Arya Samaj follower in India, a marriage that she soon wanted to escape (Rudolph, Rudolph, and Kanota 382). She wanted to be a writer, a profession that was a new cultural marker for middle-class women. Thus, carefully charting her way through middle-class marriage and respectability, Susila Tahl Ram worked her way to press and authorship.

The cosmopolitanism envisaged in the novel is a desire to script a new modernity for Punjabi women of the late-nineteenth-early-twentieth centuries through education, cultural experience of the west, mobility, renegotiated domesticity and marriage, and a transnational sisterhood. The choice of English language is, thus, instrumental to the conception of the 'cosmopolitan' outlined in the novel, which seeks to establish transnational networks and solidarities. Apart from seeking social networks and audiences, the use of English perhaps marks a claim to enter into the discursive space of power of English language and literature. The claim over English opens up subversive possibilities to imagine a transnational, affective 'sisterhood' based on empathy.

The discussion above establishes that English operated in various ways in the cultural fields of reading, writing, and consumption and was appropriated by colonial subjects to suit their own needs. Assessing the trajectory of English through a transnational framework helps in locating colonial subjectivity in larger imperial circuits rather than only in national and local confines.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The reference is to the title of Chatterjee (1986).
- <sup>2</sup> For further reference see Joshi (2002: 94) and R. Chatterjee (2001).
- <sup>3</sup> The railway library was a series of short stories published in cheap, pamphlet form to cater to railway travellers. The venture was started by Emile Moreau of A.H. Wheeler and Company in 1888 at Allahabad. The series began with stories written by Rudyard Kipling and illustrated by his father John Lockwood Kipling, Principal at the Mayo School of Art in Lahore (1875) and curator of the Lahore Central Museum. Towheed (2009) provides evidence to believe that most readers of this series were Indians.
- <sup>4</sup> Trubner's *American, European and Oriental Literary Record*, Vol. 2, January to December 1882.
- <sup>5</sup> Home Political (A), No. 204, February 1909 and Home Political (A), No. 9-13, May 1913.
- <sup>6</sup> Home Political (A), No. 3-5, July 1907.
- <sup>7</sup> Home Political (A), No. 22-5, May 1908.
- <sup>8</sup> Home Political (B), No. 33-40, August 1914.
- <sup>9</sup> Home Political Deposit, No. 7, April 1911 and "Statement of Publications Proscribed in Each Province under the Indian Press Act, 1910" in Home Political Deposit, No. 1, April 1912.
- <sup>10</sup> Home Political (A), No. 1-6, November 1912.
- <sup>11</sup> Home Political Deposit, No.1, April 1912.
- <sup>12</sup> Some of these titles are *Fashiondar Vahuti* ("Fashionable Bride"), *Fashiondar Ranaa* ("Fashionable Women"), *Alu Right te Varian Good* (Potatoes are Good and Vadis are Right"), *Fashionable Fancy Val* ("Fashionable Fancy Hair"), *Kanak te Fashion* ("Wheat and Fashion"), *Fashion da Syapa* ("Lamentations on Fashion") (printed books in Punjabi in the British Library Collection).
- <sup>13</sup> Education, Education (A), No. 1-13, February 1915.
- <sup>14</sup> Sarala Devi (1872-1945) was the daughter of Swarnakumari Debi (Rabindranath Tagore's sister) and editor of *Bharati*, a monthly journal, from 1895. Kamala Sathianadhan was a writer and editor of *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, published in Madras from 1901-1918 under her editorship, and later from 1927 to 1938.

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# Dialogues Across Time: Omair Ahmad's *The Storyteller's Tale*

JASBIR JAIN

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**Abstract:** The present paper is about the long multicultural inheritance of the oral narrative, its multiple origins and use in the modern narrative. Orality need not necessarily be placed in an historical context as its moral value long survives its original context. The significant thing is the presence of the listener/s, which serves as a congregation and almost a ceremonial presence of the narrator. The tradition of oral narratives has travelled across time and space and religious and secular discourses.

Omair Ahmad's *The Storyteller's Tale* locates the narrative in mid-eighteenth century, a narrative with historical context on destruction and dislocation. Against this there are nearly half a dozen male and three women narrators. Each narrative reveals a tale of trust and betrayal, love and revenge, power and ambition. Often repetitive in their narratives, the idea of difference within repetition is fully explored as an engrossing and meaningful discourse unfolds itself, both admirable and tragic in its impact. The strength of narrativity and meaning is wrapped up in its orality leaving the reader/listener sharing the powerful emotions.

Several different locales are used: war, woods, small kingdoms, urban scapes, etc as the narrative travels from Delhi to Awadh.

*Keywords:* Orality, betrayal, trust, love, friendship, relationships, repetition

Orality is a rich inheritance that has survived over the centuries. It has multiple origins - religious discourse, public communication, children's literature - and is marked by the presence of a listener or listeners. It is a tradition interlaced with history, moral values, and human responses. In its reaching out to an audience it bridges distances. As a form, the oral narrative has travelled across time and space. In India, the epics are filled with sub narratives, which lend themselves to reinterpretation.<sup>1</sup> Then we have the *Kathasaritasagar* and the form of the 'Katha'. There are Vrat Kathas, and *Satyanarayan Ki Katha* among others. They are didactic and moralistic in intent. And can be used for political awakening as the Gandhi Kathas in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. Sarah Joseph uses stories for ecological purposes. These have come to inhabit the modern narrative, especially in language literatures, wherein the spoken voice is prominent and storytelling a ceremony.<sup>2</sup> Examples of embedded orality abound in many classics. One wonders whether it reaches out to the illiterate or does it voice the marginal voice but whenever it enters a mainstream literary narrative it arouses interest. Contemporary writers often use it as a dislocationary strategy. Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Mario Vargas Llosa make abundant use of it in several of their novels.

The oral narrative travels across geographical space and cultures. In India, the 'Kissa' has travelled to us, as have the *Thousand and One Nights* and the Persian *Totu Maina Ki Kahani*. I could go on giving endless examples, but the important thing in its invasion of the modern narrative is to further stress its multi-layeredness and re-formation of discourse. Githa Hariharan uses myths in several of her novels. *The Thousand Faces of Night*, her very first novel, comments on the strength of the myth as a multiple discourse. When the maid narrates the myths, they are liberatory, but when her father-in-law voices the Sanskrit version, they are restrictive. In *When Dreams Travel*, she uses the *Thousand and One Nights* as a take-off point to address women's issues, their battle for survival, their suppressed desires, and unrealised dreams. Their hidden strengths and the quality of feminine bonding is also foregrounded. In *Ghosts of Vasu Master*, orality is used for addressing the obtuseness of the underdeveloped pupil, Potato Head, as Vasu narrates his mother's recipes and both teaches and inspires him and gets him to respond.

This lengthy introduction was intended to bring the oral narrative into the modern stream. Omair Ahmad's<sup>3</sup> *The Storyteller's Tale* covers both time and space. Located in the eighteenth century, the invasion of Ahmad Shah Abdali (1757) is the dislocating factor. The unnamed storyteller is the traveller who carries his past with him as an inexperienced rider he rides out of the devastated city with a royal past. He is dehousing and dispossessed. All the other main characters in the novel receive the titles of their positions, such as Begum, Mirza and Khan Sahib. But names are only provided for the younger generation, the subordinate characters, the animals, and the outcasts. The storytelling turns into a dialogue. After the first tale is over, it is followed by another. For the weary traveller had sought his way to a haveli he had spotted from the top of the hill.

As he finds his way to the haveli, his presence is not noticed all at once, but then he seeks their hospitality for the night and tells a tale in return. This is a story about an unwed mother, who is helped by her father to escape to the forest against the wrath of the villagers. In her place, her father is killed, and their house set on fire. In the forest the woman is confronted by a wolf cub and she feeds him, along with her new born son, on her breast milk. The boy, named Taka, meaning nameless, shares his name Taka with the wolf and the mother then gives her son the name Wara (free). As time passes, the wolf grown up, the woman takes to tying him with a rope when she leaves Wara alone. Once, when she is out in search of food, wild dogs attack Wara, and Taka, pulls at his rope in order to save his brother. But when the woman returns, noticing blood on Taka's mouth, a feeling of distrust and betrayal overtakes her, she kills him with her axe. This tale is of significance because it speaks of love and life, the sacrifice of the father, the growing distrust in the woman's heart and the misunderstanding that follows. The very idea of brotherhood is attacked. This tale is also important because it offers material for reinterpretations and scope for re-narration.

After a night's rest when the traveller reappears next afternoon, the Begum offers him hospitality for another night and proposes to don the role of a storyteller. All this is possible because the Mirza is away on his conquests. She envies her husband his freedom. Free spirited and bold and of Pathan heritage, she seeks expression for herself. Ahmad's story has multiple frames: there is the outer structure of the main narrative and inside this are several other stories, each offering continuity of two kinds – one linked to the first story, the other a continuation of the hidden narrative of suppressed desire and unfulfilled love, of dreams and longings, of sibling relationships not permitted to take their own course and of compulsions and failures. Within the individual stories there is,

at times, a third strand which comments on the narratological strategy. The Begum's tale is a reworking of the first story, and it reflects both on her powers of imagination and her value system, how she interprets and inducts it with new meaning and directions. It steps out of the forest to an inhabited area, to the pursuits of men and to an empire, which has changed many hands. But on its borderlands was a place called Thakir. The Begum describes the Amir as 'an intelligent man of great feeling', a man who was fortunate enough to find a wife his equal. (One wonders whether this is a silent comment on her own marriage). They had a son, who they named Aresh (generosity). But then the child's mother dies and the heartbroken Amir, in search of a wet nurse picks upon a woodcutter's wife. The Amir takes upon himself to name the woodcutter's son a name that will be worthy of him. Reluctant to give the Amir this right, the couple tries to hedge their way out of it. But persisting, the Amir named the child Barab (pillar). The two boys, Aresh and Barab, grow up as brothers. The former growing up in his freedom and the latter burdened by his inheritance. But that is not to be for long for their destiny is controlled by others more powerful and overlaid by inequalities of birth and inheritance. When a prospective match is sought for Aresh, both the boys are attracted towards the young lady who visits them. Even though Aresh pushes Barab forward, lends him his clothes the relationship does not materialise. Despite Aresh's efforts to equalise the difference, it doesn't work. Soon the time comes for them to part, to take up new responsibilities. Aresh is sent away to a magistrate friend as an apprentice in law and justice and Barab to the army to guard the empire. Unused to a city, Aresh is amazed at Yasurat, where he is to join the magistrate and his family. Humble and graceful, he soon begins his job as the magistrate's assistance, keeping his young eyes open to fathom people hearts and the impulse which may have ended in crime. In his uprightness he refuses to yield to the magistrate's wife's seductive tactics and in return he is accused of rape and thrown into prison and sentenced to death. The magistrate, though aware of his innocence, cannot declare him so, 'Too much rides upon her reputation, my reputation – I can't sacrifice all that for you' (59). The world of justice is thoroughly exposed by the magistrate's attitude who to protect his own reputation and a guilty wife is prepared to send a promising young man to his death. The magistrate visits Aresh in the prison cell and he also brings a bag with him which contains weapons of death with which Aresh could either kill himself or the guard. He decides to kill himself, thus releasing his soul to keep his appointment with his brother.

The Begum's story enlarges on the same theme as the storyteller's but it shifts it from the forest to the palace. The cycle is still not complete. The storyteller has another story to tell and thus his stay is further extended. He feels bested by the Begum's story. A woman who has not had his experience had narrated a powerful tale, one which has also gone to prove her imagination and power of invention. His story is a continuation of the Begum's story and focuses on Barab the child born in the woodcutter's family and not trained in violence. But his personality is still possessed by his parental inheritance – sometimes his mother whispers the name Taka – which in fact belongs to the first story. 'It was like living with a ghost in the house, a presence that could be sensed, but never seen. Barab grew up haunted with the name that his mother would speak, but never acknowledge (70-71). Taking to muttering in his sleep, Barab had to share the name of his former self with Aresh. But as Barab grew older, even though he discarded the conscious memory, an unconscious memory possessed him. When the woodcutter gifted both the boys with knives when they were eleven, the memory is fully aroused by watching

the sunlight gleam on the knife. Then it was not Barab but Taka: 'It was Taka who felt the throb of violence in the wood, and who instinctively knew that the steel of the blade would taste like blood. It was Taka who laughed in the woods in sudden delight. Taka who finally took possession of Barab, held his body and laughed with his voice' (72).

And then this is the opportunity to reintroduce the story of Taka and Wara. The young boy struggled to reclaim his body. Aresh weeps at the ending of the story, an emotion that the listener/reader has felt all along. How can a mother's love turn to hatred just like that 'why couldn't she just let him loose? What kind of love is that?' (73). Barab disagrees. Barab's response is an explanation not only of the first story but it also addresses the major issue in relationships that of inequality. 'Taka was a wolf, he could not have lived his life being a brother to a human.... Taka repaid his debt; he proved his love while it still existed. He died guiltless, without betraying those whom he had loved' (74). It was thus his childhood name forced on him the act of violence. Feeling an increasing strangeness in himself, one day, Barab told Aresh, 'We can't be friends' (78). The cause for this is the inequality of birth and hence of destiny.

In the meantime, the Amir is engaged in training Barab in war strategy by placing armies, castles and siege engines in place and engaged in bygone battles, and 'wars the world hadn't yet seen' (83). Through this he is teaching him the art of leadership, where his will controls the direction of the battle. Barab was thus trained to lead armies and to shoulder responsibility. A time comes when, in order to save the state, Barab decides to mislead the enemy, while the Amir can prepare for war. With only a handful of soldiers, he meets the raiders. The whole party was aware that they were too few and the attack meant sure death. Barab, before setting out, sends a letter to Aresh, to remind him of his promise to meet on a certain day, and he too dies in the border battle that ensues, I ke Aresh in the magistrates' cell. The meeting between brothers – Aresh and Barab – is this a meeting between ghosts, a meeting which sends out mixed responses amongst the audience. Is it tragic? Sublime? The keeping of a promise beyond death? 'There was silence when the story came to an end, or perhaps it was a set of silences, since the reactions of the audience had many flavours' (94). But in this the Begum also sees an insult to Mirza, who is also a brigand, a raider, in search of new conquests. And she is the kind who needs to have the last word. Through the agency of Mehrunnisa – her maid – she conveys to the traveller that his welcome is over and he should leave on the next day in the morning, but she also she pins him down to another story session, where he is to be the listener and she the teller. The storyteller held all raiders in the category of Ahmad Shah Abdali, and hated them. 'He despised them and knew that they were destroying something that they couldn't build, and whose greatness they couldn't even fully grasp' (96). Abdali had destroyed the city of poets. And though he tenders his apology, it is to no avail. The last story in this series is titled 'The magistrate's wife and the girl'. The Begum is upset because the storyteller had taken her 'own fable, a story of her own lands and opened vistas within it that she had not seen. He had undressed her like a lover, with care, marvelling at a beauty that she had never noticed' (99).

The last story is the magistrate's wife's, told after Aresh's death. On the third day of mourning, while Aresh's body was still laid on blocks of ice, she invites the most notable women of the city to the temple, where Aresh's body lay. Eager to clear her name for being the cause that led to his death, she pleads innocence and presenting them all with knives, she asks them to go and view Aresh's body to gauge how handsome he was, majestic in a way that one was irresistibly attracted to him. They all grasp their hands, in

wonder as they admire him and cut their hands. Except one. She is the girl who had visited the Amir's house, as a possible suitor for Aresh, when she was only fifteen. And as both the boys were attracted toward her, Aresh pushed Barab forward. The match did not materialise but the memory still lingers. Here is a story within a story. No farewell is ever complete or final. The confession of the magistrate's wife has reopened the past for the young woman, Nisia. Though this memory is past, the magistrate's wife still feels envious of her. Nisia has her own regrets of having missed a life with Aresh and living as his wife in Thakir, a beautiful place. But her parents called her back. Life was never the same after that. But Nisia did not figure in Aresh's story. It was a brief courtship of a bouquet of flowers one morning. After that only Barab came her way. And like a character who is still lingering behind the curtains, when the play is already over and Aresh is dead.

Like Nisia, after listening to this tale, the reluctant traveller is also sad. For would he come across a woman like Begum again in his travels a woman who could speak, invent and imagine like her? The Begum used stories to express herself. Few women were capable of that. As the journey proceeds from the devastated Delhi, through the badlands of Rohilakhand, the traveller finds his way to Awadh and many years have passed when a young man visits him. He is the Mirza's son, who had been requested by his mother to meet him so he could teach the young man a lesson – 'About what?' The young man replied – 'About leaving your love.'

The storyteller then tells him: 'After the leave-taking, . . . there is the leaving. And once you have left, you discover the ten thousand things that you will still carry memories of touch, scent and sight. It is only after leaving is only after leaving that you discover the city within you has changed, and its roads wind now in different destination. After the end of love there is the unloving, when you can engage in the ceaseless hunt for all the things to be taken out, and somehow discarded, when you can fight against the new roads and try, futilely, to return to what you were before.' (118).

This leave-taking doesn't end there. It is followed by a realisation of one's own incomplete journey – 'The maps have changed, the continents have shifted, and the horizons are not what you remember.' The journey still continues, however difficult and dreary it maybe, but 'the courage to see that the first step is always departure' (118).

The storyteller's tale is an ongoing journey of relationships, of love, distrust and betrayal, of death and love, of grieving and repentance, of longing and desire of the need for freedom and the possibility of alternative routes within bondage. The Begum longs for freedom. She cannot go out like the Mirza on journeys of adventure. Why was it that the Mirza could ride to war, could lead men to battle, and hold them by the leash of loyalty to him while she remained trapped here? (32). This is a desire she fulfils through the strength of her imagination, her horse-riding and her own rebellious nature. The stories they exchange, build a strong narrative of their own. In actuality, the traveller tells two stories, and the Begum responds by two. Then there is the aftermath of the son's visit to Lucknow, but by the manner in which they are interwoven and the characters find new lives in fresh stories with changed names, they simply seem to multiply as they move from a forest to an empire, Thakir; from a wolf cub to a woodcutter's son. And then the continuing journey to a city – a gradual enlargement of space and opening out of civilizational dimensions. And then passion, followed by revenge. In the fifth one – which again is a double story consisting of the confession of the magistrate's wife and the long suppressed longing for Aresh in Nisia's heart! All the stories work with the emotions that crowd one's life, while the exchange between the traveller and the Begum's son is a summing up of life – the need to go on, to hoard memories and yet to move on.



These stories, despite the aura of distance they carry, are very real. Even the very first story where the wolf cub shares Wara's mother and his cast-off name. Located in mid-eighteenth century, it keeps on defining physical locations and relates to history. The writer's strategy is to remind us constantly of the fact that such emotions are real, not very distant from our own times or lives. The presence of a listener who is determined to switch rules in almost every story is another factor. It is not only the Begum who takes up throws a challenge, it is even Nisia who narrates her own story to the magistrate's wife's confession bringing out the difference in the way the two women have faced disappointment in their love. From the earlier stories also the Begum has a firm control over her desires – it is not only the traveller who was attracted towards her, she too was more than half in love with him for he offered an antidote to her loneliness. The game they play is akin to a game of chess, later reflected in Amir's training sessions with Barab. The repetition within these stories – changed names with similar meanings, similar conflicts with different endings – is both creative and enriching. It also adds to the meaning as the winding narrative sets to reveal its hidden layers and suppressed meanings. As Deleuze has worked out in his work *Repetition and Difference*, no repetition is ever the same, 'Repetition is not generality. .... Reflections, echoes doubles and souls do not belong to the domain of resemblance or equivalence; and it is no more possible to exchange one's soul than it is to substitute real twins for one another'. He goes on to expound, 'To repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent' and perhaps this repetition 'at the level of external conduct echoes. for its own part, a more secret vibration which animates it, a more profound, internal within the singular' (1).<sup>4</sup> We find repetitions working very significantly in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, reflecting on faith, doubt, and conflict, to reveal the triangular relationship between the father, his son and God There are three different endings in the narrative.

The distance in time in Ahmad's *The Storyteller's Tale* narrative is not a distance from life. It is in an identifiable historical period. It does not present the self-enclosed or enticing world of Alladin or Sindbad the Sailor. Instead it summons us to dwell within the narrative to explore our own emotions, to imagine loss and to find meaning in our experiences. Ahmad's *Tale* different from his other works, works with an unfamiliar ground and yet one so much a part of our childhood. Fascinating and absorbing, it does not unravel itself in one reading. It offers a rare example of storytelling. So far removed yet so close. It touches both our heart and mind, like a sad song or unsung ghazal. It is close to a fable, loaded as it is with meaning, leaving its readers free to approach it from any angle – narratological, structural, gender, power, jealousy and so many other ways, leading one to multiple journeys of interpretation. Where then is reality? I need here to refer to Paul Ricoeur's concept of mimesis, expounded so beautifully in his *Time and Narrative*. Ricoeur works with three stages of mimesis: Mimesis<sub>1</sub> is an objective description of how human action actually takes place, the second stage, Mimesis<sub>2</sub>, is the emplotment. It serves as a mediating function. The third and the final stage, Mimesis<sub>3</sub>, integrates the imagined and the experienced – the actual lived experience and the fictive perspective.<sup>5</sup> Ahmad's world is inhabited by recognisable human characters, who could exist in any age. And around them he weaves a fascinating tale of love and disappointment, of hatred and revenge, of dreams and passion, and of friendship and trust.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is evident in Girish Karnad's plays and several other writers like Shankar Shesh and others, who have used stories from the Mahabharata and reinterpreted them for our times. Refer Karnad's *Yayati* amongst several others.
- <sup>2</sup> My reference, here is to Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* (Malayalam, translated simultaneously into English). In Joseph's novel the storyteller has a ritual bath and then proceeds to tell the story. Every time there is a different storyteller and at the end of the story the audience invariably wants to find out, 'how can we use it in life?.'
- <sup>3</sup> Omair Ahmad's other works include a political history of Bhutan and the eastern Himalayan region and a novel *Jimmy the Terrorist*, shortlisted for the Man Asian Booker Prize and has been awarded the Crossword Prize. A journalist by profession, he lives in the US.
- <sup>4</sup> See Deleuze's Introduction to his *Difference and Repetition* (1968), translated by Paul Patton, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- <sup>5</sup> Ricoeur's concept of mimesis is spread over all the three volumes, but the summing up takes place in the third volume.

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# Between Ekstasis, Ekphrasis and Kinesis: Theatricality and Performativities in the Poetry of Meena Kandasamy

BENIL BISWAS

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**Abstract:** In this article, I seek to argue that Meena Kandasamy's (1984 -) poetic endeavours call for an alternative academic framework beyond mere symbolism, textualism and identitarian determinism. I suggest that although much has been inscribed on her positionality as a Dalit feminist, not enough critical evaluation has focused on how performativity and theatricality permeate her body of work as a whole. Her expressions can be studied as a clarion call to transcend norms, forms, and practices through an embodied experientiality of self and an invitation to consciously ruminate on the art of poetry itself, that too in English originating from margins of everyday life in South Asia, but as reverberations for the entire world. This article will perform a close reading of select poems from the two poetry collections by Meena Kandasamy - *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010) to substantiate the arguments and bring about her contribution to form, content, and new directions in Indian Writing in English.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Dalit, Ekstasis, Ekphrasis, Kinesis, Kandasamy, Theatricality, Performativity.

## Locating the Oeuvre of Meena Kandasamy's Poetry: An Introduction

With the first poetry collection, *Touch* published at the age of 22, in a short span of 36 years, Meena Kandasamy has already been a trailblazer, as a conscientious public intellectual. She has been a poet, an editor, a novelist, and a translator of more than a dozen books that run into over 1,500 pages.<sup>1</sup> No doubt, the abject gendered relationality that demarcates the geopolitical location of Kandasamy as evident in her prose writings does animate her poetic expressions too. Similarly, the poetry reverberates with a deep historical rumination and influences her so-called 'prosaic' writings. Her conscious effort as a creative writer leads her to challenge any kind of norms, which is evident in her treatment of literary genres. In this article, I seek to argue that Meena Kandasamy's poetic endeavours call for an alternative academic framework beyond mere symbolism, textualism and identitarian determinism. I suggest that although much has been inscribed on her positionality as a Dalit feminist, not enough critical evaluation has focused on how performativity and theatricality permeate her body of work as a whole. Her expressions can be seen as a clarion call to transcend norms, forms and practices through an embodied experientiality of self and an invitation to ruminate on the art of poetry itself consciously, that too in English originating from margins of everyday life in South Asia, but for the entire world. To substantiate the arguments and bring about Meena Kandasamy's contribution to form and content in Indian Writing in English, we will do a close reading of some poems from the two poetry collections - *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010).

### Viscerality and Embodied Presence

Touch is an expression that serves as a title for Kandasamy's first poetry collection (2006). Touch as haptics has been a way to define our experientiality in contemporary times, with the digital ushering of our everyday lives. In our daily interaction with the digital, we all the more intermingle and internalise the notion of touch as an unmediated custom. Axiomatically, this interaction with the digital as is your interaction with this article itself, while accessing it on a website or in print, is perhaps made only possible by an engagement with the haptic as a precondition, which facilitates other modes of perception, i.e., sight, and sound. Parallely, haptic or touch is the fundamental marker of what defines casteism or caste-based practices in this part of the world. Aniket Jaaware, in a meticulously argued proposition, *Practicing Caste: on Touching and Not Touching* (2018), has already drawn our attention to how touch fundamentally defines our relationship with others, regulates our behaviour and evolution as a social animal.<sup>2</sup> Of course, these times of global crisis like a pandemic - Covid-19, led us to engage with social distancing as a concept. Still, perhaps if we look through it from the perspective of the performative dynamics of caste in India, we will be able to comprehend that 'social distancing' is not a new concept, which has been practised since ages in India, in the form of the caste system. Through the ages, social distancing and sustained cultural amnesia have led the Dalits and marginalized entities to strive for an autonomous space of cultural and political articulations. Therefore, the act of touch is perhaps our way to understand the larger concept of society and sociability. Kandasamy concludes the eponymous poem with the following lines,

But, you will never have known that touch—the taboo  
to your transcendence,  
when crystallized in caste  
was a paraphernalia of undeserving hate. (*Touch* 36)

It is an invocation of touch to help us think through the possibilities associated with touching and not touching any- "thing," which transcends the "thing" itself and goes on to be related to a person's being, especially associated with caste or specific religious identity. Kandasamy perhaps wants us to touch our sensibilities, or initiate us to engage in a haptic imagination, enabling us to experience those existences as if they touch us in a bid to move us, unsettle us. 'Touch' then becomes a generative expression in her poetry that brings in visceral experiences, which otherwise cannot be spoken. She carefully chooses her words, replete with verbs like "come", "invade", "capture", "lead", "teach", "make", "talk", "press" and many more. All these words lead us to actively stage the actions depicted in her poetry and dynamically become participants. This embodiment on the part of the readers as active co-creators of the activities in her poems leads us to think of the apparent theatricality that engenders her poetry. The concept of theatricality here, as the inherent theatre of everyday life and drama as to how Kandasamy acts as a stage director, developing scenes and narration in her poems. Erika Fischer Lichte defines theatricality as,

a particular mode of using signs or as a particular kind of semiotic process in which particular signs (human beings and objects of their environment) are employed as signs of signs - by their producers, or their recipients. Thus a shift of the dominance within the semiotic functions determines when theatricality appears. When the semiotic function of using signs as signs of signs in a behavioural, situational or communication process is

perceived and received as dominant, the behavioural, situational or communication process may be regarded as theatrical. (88-89)

Drawing on Fischer Lichte's recapitulation, one can see the actions embodied in the poetry of Meena Kandasamy within this paradigm of theatricality, where a sign is employed as a sign of signs. For instance, in the poem, "Lines addressed to a Warrior" (Touch13), she deploys expressions like, "come colonise me.", "invade this inner-space.", and "capture every territory.", which can well be associated with the larger historical meaning linked with spoils of colonialism; however, in her usage, she personalizes the broader cultural sign into an individual one. In return, the individual then stands for the society. These metonymic individuated microcosmic experiences guide the readers and the audience into exploring the macrocosm. The poems in both the poetry collection, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010) by Kandasamy, are replete with such imagery. Mundane everyday activities felt on a visceral level, stands in for enormous discriminative ideas that plague society. The title of the collection *Ms. Militancy* reminds one of Langston Hughes' poems, entitled "Militant" (*Panther*39), where the mundane daily inequalities lead the poet to articulate a resistant voice. Analogously, for Kandasamy, her context's specificities do herald a caste consciousness and discourse of the 'other'. However, she makes a dialogue possible between two disparate, seemingly antagonistic entities. For example, she writes,

Your affinity to catch colds; my rising fevers on seeing you  
Your headaches, your backaches; my avowed helplessness  
Your falling asleep while waiting for my reply  
Your asking me to remain with you for all of time. . .  
All your delicious lies. . . (*Touch* 30)

This description of the daily ailments that plague our perishable bodies provides a voice to the symbolic and emergent imperishable alienation that beset us universally. These situations that engender communication, or the lack thereof, are symptomatic of Kandasamy's poetry in general, where there is a foregrounding of a scene's enactment. As readers, we are privy too, facilitating a shared co-creation of meaning, where we do understand the context that emanates such iterations. Still, we also embody these characters and re-enact the situation on our terms. A performative use of language brings about this conscious, deliberate enactment of theatricality as prevalent in her poetry. Performative language reflects on matters regarding the connotation and denotations of language, identity, and the subject's nature. Performative utterances do not explicate but perform the action they iterate. Philosophers have extensively asserted that we must concentrate on what literary language does while focusing on what it says. The theory of the performative offers a linguistic and philosophical rationalisation for this idea. The performative brings into limelight an active, world-making use of language, which resembles literary language and helps us conceive literature as an act or event. Austin (1975) and Derrida (1988) develop the theory of performativity, and Butler (1988) further applies it to gender.<sup>3</sup> In Kandasamy's poetry, we see this constant self-reflexive awareness of language, the emergent literature as an act or event which unfolds, provoking possibilities. In the poem, "Facing the music," she writes

Your lover was lynched  
For one of those readily available reasons.  
Too weak for suicide, too meek for murder

You live. Post-traumatically, poetically,  
 You live as if he has never died. (*Ms. Militancy* 21)

In the lines mentioned above, Kandasamy perhaps states the obvious, depicting how lynching happens in India and around the world, owing to a certain hierarchical, patriarchal belief system. However, in the following line, she also announces the turmoil that writhes within, as if poetry is the only solution to deal with post-traumatic feelings. This conscious critique is not necessarily about the impossibility of expression or worthlessness that might engender the creative art of poetry, but on the contrary, it is a provocation for what poetry should be able to do and not in the obliteration of the so-called amnesia “as if he has never died”. She does not stop there but further depicts how this incident transformed the experiencer’s being, and history was born with a specific realization of how one needs to act and bring about a change. This performative usage of language and dealing with the performative reiterations of life activities ranging from theatrical performances to rituals, ceremonies to public events, populate the imaginaries that Kandasamy provides us in her poetry. In a similar vein, she invokes fire walking traditions as a purification ritual, (*Ms. Militancy* 22), again offering us a possibility of transformation. Thus, Kandasamy’s poetry is a vehicle not just to challenge the dominant ideological structures which facilitates the perpetuation of discriminatory practices, but it is a self-conscious attempt to address structural inadequacies of discursive practices and poetry being one of such a practice. There is a recurrent critical engagement with the form and content of Epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, along with various Brahmanical scriptures, only develop a familiar ground on which the foundation of recent assertions of equity can be founded. For example, the poem “Ekalaivan,” contemporizes the character from the epic *Mahabharata* and places him in the present context,

This note comes as a consolation:

You can do a lot of things  
 With your left hand.  
 Besides, fascist Dronacharyas warrant Left-handed treatment.  
 Also,  
 You don’t need your right thumb, To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb. (*Kandasamy Touch* 44)

In the episode of Ekalaivan losing his right thumb as *Gurudakshina* (donation to the teacher) to his teacher, Dronacharya becomes the catalyst to ruminate on possibilities of resistance in contemporary times. It enacts two conjoined functions; one, the hierarchical pedagogic conditions of the epic are seen through the prism of historical thinking, as a comparison of fascism appears in the poetry. On the other hand, the epic character of Dronacharya, a teacher, stands as a function for many symbolic Dronacharyas of our times, which underscores the hierarchical tradition of discriminatory Guru-Shishya Parampara. Further, a poem like “Advaita: the ultimate question” (*Kandasamy Touch* 37) and “Moksha” (*Kandasamy Ms. Militancy* 32) are specimens of formalistic rumination and critical commentary on the discourses embedded in the scriptures. Yet again, the poems, “Becoming a Brahmin” (*Kandasamy Touch* 42), and “Things to remember while looting the burial ground” (*Kandasamy Ms. Militancy* 57), are presented to us as an instruction manual or recipe book. At this juncture, when we are ruminating on kinds and forms of poetry itself, surrounded by visceral and bodily co-presence in works of Kandasamy, one is reminded of this evocative enunciation by Derrida, standing on the *Margins of Philosophy*, “The poet...is the man of metaphor: while the philosopher is

interested only in the truth of meaning, beyond even signs and names, and the sophist manipulates empty signs...the poet plays on the multiplicity of signifieds." (248) Thus, to interpret the poetry of the Meena Kandasamy in context, we perhaps need to look into the playing of "the multiplicity of signifieds" – by not just looking for meaning within the text, but all around it. In other words, poetry can only make sense in not just looking for literal meaning but also reading between the lines, the form used and subsequent contextualization.

Kandasamy asserts in an interview with *Sampsonia Way*, "Poetry, it is raw. It is real. It is full of jagged edges. My poetry is naked, my poetry is in tears, my poetry screams in anger, my poetry writhes in pain. My poetry smells of blood, my poetry salutes sacrifice. My poetry speaks like my people, my poetry speaks for my people." (Duarte) We see a conscious attempt to justify poetry as the means for the desired end, a dialogue. A dialogue that emerges from a theatrical context must be understood as a mode of communication and conversation. Poetry is perhaps the way for Meena Kandasamy to get across her thoughts, which subscribe to the inherent lyricality that animate all indigenous community through the notion of orature, from birth to death; every event is conceptualized and conceived through evident musicality. Through her poetic critique of dominant literary discourses, Kandasamy opens to us a whole world of discursive practices and also the modes of possible resistance.

Kandasamy's exploration in textuality through her poems, attempt to reveal the impact of dominant literary discourses on alternative practices of creativity, which helps us unravel dominant and violent power/knowledge relations within a given society. Several of her performative poems show how dominant power/knowledge systems tend to appropriate marginal voices through the visceral act of violence on either individual or society at large. W.B. Worthen, underlining the productive relation between authoritarian canonical works and possibilities of performative texts, writes, "It's not surprising that Barthes's opposition between the work (authoritarian, closed, fixed, single, consumed) and the text (liberating, open, variable, traced by intertexts, performed) proves so useful to contemporary discourse about performance." (12) This argument provides multifarious possibilities for reading and understanding a text, encompassing all its manifested signifieds. Worthen rightly argues that this performative reading of Text as one possibility should then include both the probabilities as mentioned earlier. He further asserts:

Stage vs. page, literature vs. theatre, text vs. performance: these simple oppositions have less to do with the relationship between writing and enactment than with power, with the ways that we authorize performance, ground its significance. Not surprisingly, both strategies of authorization - literary and performative - share similar assumptions, what we might call a rhetoric of origin/essence. This rhetoric appears to ground the relationship between text and performance, a relationship that is always conceived, as John Rouse suggests, as "a question both of the possible and the allowable" (1992: 146). From the "literary" perspective, the meaning, and so the authority, of performance is a function of how fully it expresses the meanings, gestures, themes located in the structures of the work, which is taken both as the ground and the origin of performance and as the embodiment of authorial intention, the work. Though performance may discover meanings or nuances not immediately available through "reading" or "criticism," these meanings are nonetheless seen as latent potentialities located in the words on the page, the traces of the authorial work. (12)

Worthen points at the rhetoric of origin/essence but also specifies the exploration as "a question both of the possible and the allowable", which gives rise to the notion of how

certain narrative/performative (in various modes) ends up underlining conventions and also potentialities, subject to specific conditionings and conceptualizations of any individual in a given society. Consequently, keeping this in mind, a textual analysis, in the lines of a genealogical enquiry of the work (genre/form) through scholarly pursuits, would be essential to construe various methodological impetuses foregrounded in the works of Meena Kandasamy.

Now we understand Kandasamy's poetry has a strong undercurrent of theatricality and discursive performativity. This view is further attested by herself when she mentions, "Poetry is not caught up within larger structures that pressure you to adopt a certain set of practices while you present your ideas in the way that academic language is. Despite being an academic myself, I dread academia's ultra-intellectualizing." (Duarte) This assertion by Kandasamy can itself be read as a provocation to the existing discursive practices to strive to attain a poetic language that can "speak of the oppressed." Her poetry then achieves a generative function, a manifestation of Bakhtin's dialogism.<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin mentions, "When someone else's ideological discourse is internally persuasive for us and acknowledged by us, entirely different possibilities open up" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 345). In dialogism, the provocation is to performatively co-create a language in which any victim would speak and be meaningfully understood. The same spirit of personalization and dialogism can be seen in Kandasamy's characterizations of selves, with the recurrent usage of personal pronouns in the poems. She uses a variety of pronouns, but 'You' requires a special mention as it at once can be singular or plural, and also it addresses the one reading a poem directly, establishing a dialogic connection, wherein a person participates with the entirety of his/her being, with eyes, lips, hands, soul, with the whole body as Bakhtin would put it. (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 293) This apparent dialogicity can be better understood if we infer two conditions or processes, namely, Ekstasis and Ekphrasis, which facilitate such a performative usage of poetry, especially and language in general. For example, even when she writes a "Monologue" (Kandasamy *Touch* 29), it is an interrogation of unidirectional communication and an intense urge towards initiating a dialogue.

### Poetry as Ekstasis

Ekstasis is a Greek term, popularly used in Greek drama and theatre, where worshipping Dionysus would involve achieving ecstasy (in Greek, ekstasis or "standing out"), and for some, the aesthetic experience of attending the theatre. In Greek theatre, the performer-audience relationship was also about "becoming involved in the sufferings of another" and "was in some sense an ekstasis." (Storey 30) Existential philosophy perhaps rearticulated concepts of ekstasis to bring about a discrete kind of being, which was commonly used in Greek theatre, the context of mystical practices and rituals across the world from an anthropological and phenomenological perspective in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this context, ekstasis of the being is defined as "casting itself out of its own given place and time, without dissipating," writes Alphonso Lingis, "because at each moment it projects itself — or, more exactly, a variant of itself — into another place and time." (6) Here, Lingis asserts that the manifestation of the being is defined by its reconstitute-ability anywhere and at any moment. The being is a result of this constant dialogue with the other. Lingis, further states, "*Ex-istence*, understood etymologically, is not so much a state or a stance as a movement, which is by conceiving a divergence from itself or a potentiality of itself and casting itself into that divergence with all that it is." (6)



Kandasamy's poetry accentuates this understanding of 'being' in relation to others. However, Kandasamy perhaps does not draw her reading on ekstasis from the European thinkers. She harks back to alternative proclamations and voices of dissent in the mystical practices of ancient and medieval India. The figures of Mira, Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Karaikkal Ammaiyar features prominently in her poetry. In one sense, this invocation of the mystic, ecstatic figures from ancient and medieval India can be seen as a direct reference to the importance of the state of ecstasy, to leave behind oneself and to be one with the one depicted as an essential precondition to have a dialogue. In another sense, it is also a performative act to invite the readers to feel at one with the characters, as if on a journey to embody the characters and selves portrayed in the poems. It is an expression of ekstasis, when Kandasamy writes, "my Mahabharata moves to Las Vegas; my Ramayana is retold in three different ways. I am unconventional, but when I choose to, I can carry tradition." (*Ms. Militancy* 8) It is also a sign of ekstasis when the 'you' in the poetry merges with the 'you' of the audience and readers. Kandasamy further reifies this conscious choice of the ekstasis as an essential idea in her poetry, when she writes, "Like each of these women,[mentioned above] I have to write poetry to be heard, I have to turn insane to stay alive." (*Ms. Militancy* 8). For example, in the poem, "You don't know if you are yielding or resisting" (Kandasamy *Touch* 18), encapsulates the trials and tribulation that a poet has to go through to express herself. This might be the reason why Kandasamy's poetry can simultaneously express love and anger in the same breath. The expression of being getting enmeshed into beings, bringing about the possibility of dialogues and transformation, and resultant transversality echoes through the poems like "Touch", "Last Love letter", and many more from the collection *Touch* (2006). The conscious attempt to foreground the art of poetry in poetry itself leads us to explore another associated concept of Ekphrasis.

### Poetry as Ekphrasis

Literary studies typically define Ekphrastic poetry as an expression (in words) which "provides a vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art." (*Ekphrasis*) In commonplace usages, the poet may augment and expand its meaning through the creative act of narrating and reflecting on the "action" of a painting or sculpture. Of course, this does help us understand the poems by Meena Kandasamy, which are sated with visual, sensual imagery. However, in the context of our discussion, rather than limiting ourselves to the literal meaning of this genre of poetry based on established practices of literary analysis, perchance, it will be more productive to concentrate on the definition of the concept 'ekphrasis' as a coupling between word and image (Squire). More suitable to our discussion would be the Oxford English Dictionary's breaking down of the phrase ekphrasis' etymology where "Ek" means "out" and "Phrazein" means "to tell." (Lexico. Ekphrasis). In the expression, 'Out - to tell 'or to speak out,' the word finds an expression that depicts a singularity - a conscious and deliberate attempt to state the palpable without thinking about the repercussion shows its original meaning from ancient Greece. James A. W. Heffernan, while reflecting upon ekphrasis and representation, cite Shadi Bartsch on the origin of the word and possible context of its usage,

In what is probably the earliest definition of the term, which was used by Greek rhetoricians of the first five centuries A.D., it is called simply "a descriptive account bringing what is illustrated vividly before one's sight." (Shadi Bartsch, *Decoding the Ancient Novel: The Reader and the Role of Description and Achilles Tatius* [Princeton, 1989] p. 9.) [sic.] In the Greek

rhetorical handbook and paintings were treated *among* [sic.] the objects suitable for ekphrastic description, but only after the fifth century did *ekphrasis* [sic.] come to denote the description of visual art exclusively. (312)

This enunciation of ekphrasis as “a descriptive account bringing what is illustrated vividly before one’s sight”, might help us contextualize the poems mentioned not only earlier in this paper but also perhaps the entire creative oeuvre of Meena Kandasamy. The novels, non-fictions, translations embody the spirit of ekphrasis to varying degrees. It would also be productive to even think about this paper itself as an expression of ekphrasis. The part word ‘Ek,’ i.e., ‘out’ in Greek, does have a multiplicative function in our discussion, which leads us to contextualize even the Dalit identity in the context of being in exile, the living embodiment of ekstasis, which is in itself so evident in all the creative expressions we have inundated ourselves with so far in this article. The dialectic of word and image is quite central to the study of Kandasamy’s poetry. This coupling of word and image in Ekphrasis, which defines our perception, is why the term has become crucial to contemporary media theory as the intersection of verbal and visual.

Furthermore, the poem, “Why she writes of her love” (Kandasamy *Ms. Militancy* 60), not only depicts the emergent condition of her poetic expressions but also presents how the emergent media as “hyperlinks”, “tv”, “twitter” and “news” broadcast continuously shape and reshape our everyday reality. Therefore, it is also significant in the immediate context of our immersion in the poetry by Meena Kandasamy, while making sense of her identity assertion and a will towards claiming an equitable social space, underscores this very expression of ekphrasis. It is also important to note that it in this countenance of ekphrasis lies the genesis of the inter-medial expression of ‘and others’, which is a fundamental governing principle of not just Kandasamy’s creative expressions but also the quest for identity, as ekphrasis is invariably an invocation and allusion to a dissimilar mode of expression, which is her own distinct identity, but it also makes itself apparent in the form of an ekphrastic work of art be it poetry, or as we seek to argue, the practice of any kind of creative expressions. Perhaps, this is what Rancière intended to mean by the expression “being together apart”, when in *The Emancipated Spectator* (56), he defined the contemporary aesthetic regime as the one which should facilitate the interaction with the other, where each one maintains their distinct identity, but still being in a position to develop a somewhat camaraderie through the meaning-making process in the artwork. In the poetry by Meena Kandasamy, similarly, we have seen modes of performances as instances of creative expression, which might lead one to think about a very personal narrative, which may not directly stand for or represent a direct political action. However, these do emerge out of a deep political understanding of notions of identity, which in turn manifests itself in the realm of the sacred or recreational or literary mode as aesthetic pursuits, but invariably do usher in the possibility to “open up new passages towards new forms of political subjectivation.” (Rancière82) Therefore, the Dalit woman’s identity through the ekphrastic and inter-medial co-presence in the form of the simultaneous performativity of being a Dalit, Mira, Andal, Akka Mahadevi, Karaikkal Ammaiyar and many more bring about the Rancièrian imaginary, i.e. a new form of “political subjectivation.” The poetic self finds its identity only through an apparent negation of its identity. In other words, Kandasamy finds her existence only in these explorations of identities as many and not one. i.e., in other words, an expression of ekstasis. We are aware that Ekstasis is a precondition to ekphrasis. No expressions better encapsulate this dialogic spirit than ‘exile’, which seems to perpetually animate the Dalit identity in a continuous claim, movement and journey toward an autonomous space of articulation.

### Poetry as Kinesis

With ample examples of performative iterations in Kandasamy's poetry, it will be significant at this juncture to look at the emerging debates within performance studies and see how that can help us construe the meaning in the poetic oeuvre of Kandasamy and poetry in general. 'Performance', according to Conquergood, can be seen in three modes: mimesis, poiesis and kinesis. Performance as mimesis is inspired by Erving Goffman's works that "gave currency to the notions of role-playing and impression management." (*Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84). He notes that "the ultimate effect of (the) dramaturgical theory was to reproduce the Platonic binary opposition between reality and appearance, and thus sustain an anti-performance prejudice." (84) Performance as poiesis is inspired by the perception that performance is "making not faking." In other words, the performance and performative interactions bring about the possibility of the new. Conquergood recognises the role of Victor Turner in evolving this view. Conquergood further explicates that Turner "subversively redened the fundamental terms of discussion in ethnography by denying humankind as *homo performans*, humanity as performer, as a culture-inventing, social performing, self-making and self-transforming creature." (*Communication Monographs* 187) This nuanced understanding of the performative might help us understand the conscious stance taken by Kandasamy in her conception about poetry and the art of writing in general. Conquergood repeatedly underscores Turner's emphasis on performance events and processes being central to any culture, a notion that, according to him, set the stage for a more politically urgent view of performance—that which regards performance as kinesis, or as "breaking and remaking."

Consequently, Conquergood mentions Homi K. Bhabha's usage of the term "performative" and "performativity" to denote "discursive acts that insinuate, interrupt, interrogate and antagonize powerful master-discourses that he dubs 'pedagogical'". (*Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84) This allusion to performative being discursive and pedagogical can very well be true of what transpires in Kandasamy's poetry. In her visceral portrayal of rape, murder or public lynching, there are no doubt elements of mimesis and poiesis; however, more manifest is the transformative possibility of kinesis. For example, in the poem "Liquid Tragedy: Karamchedu 1985" (Kandasamy *Touch* 52), the massacre that occurred in Karamchedu, Prakasam district of Andhra Pradesh, on 17 July 1985 is portrayed, where cruelty by Kamma landlords against Dalits due to dispute over drinking water, caused the killing of six Dalits and inflicted grievous injuries to many others. Three Dalit women were raped, and the houses of Dalits were burnt and looted. This further led to the displacement of hundreds of Dalits from the village as an aftermath of the massacre. (Berg 103-26) This can very well be read as an act of mimesis or poiesis, as mentioned above. However, when we look at the pitcher shaped print of the poem, the event of the massacre is unfolded in front of our eyes and our mind; we visualize the dispute over water and embodied caste hatred. The evocation attains a new meaning as kinesis by describing the event as snapshots of sensitive information, where we encounter the visual juxtaposition of the shape of the poem and the recollection of events as its contents. Poetry in such iterations transcends the realm of representations. What it does is perhaps a re-presentation, a re-enactment of the event for us as readers, as if we are a witness and perhaps complacent in such incidents? Kinesis— as a movement, an interruption, an interrogation, a response to stimuli, where we as readers are no longer mute, passive spectators, but active agents who have been provoked and sensitized. We do see both ekstasis and ekphrasis at work here contributing to the elements of kinesis rendered visible in the poetry of Meena Kandasamy.

## Conclusion

Kandasamy might be placed within the long tradition of confessional lyric poets like Sylvia Plath (Beach 155), who appears as an inspiration in one of her poems, "Mohandas Karamchand" (*Touch* 54), which she acknowledges having "written after reading Sylvia Plath's Daddy." As in the case of Sylvia Plath, Kandasamy too expresses the social through the personal. The imagery of the Daddy, a personal rumination about one's father, transcends into the figure of the 'Father of the Nation', and self, 'I' transcends and becomes the collective 'we'. Like Sylvia Plath's contribution to mainstream American Poetry, Kandasamy, too through her lyric poetry dealing with relationships, sex, and domestic life, portrays the society at large, is conceivably extending on the works of Kamala Das, who parenthetically wrote the "Foreword" to Kandasamy's 2006 poetry collection *Touch*. To stress upon the lyricality of Kandasamy's poetry and her poetic vision, Das writes, "Dying and then resurrecting herself again and again in a country that refuses to forget the unkind myths of caste and perhaps of religion, Meena carries as her twin self, her shadow the dark cynicism of youth that must help her to survive... Revelations come to her frequently and prophecies linger at her lips." (*Touch* 7) Das's proclamation about the "revelation" and "prophecies" in the poetry of Kandasamy reminds us once again of the ekstasis and ekphrasis as conjoined processes, wherein the personal was a way to reach out to the impersonal. The aspiration to transcend one's own identity and generating a dialogic mode of communication is what Kandasamy herself mentions in a recent interview with *The Mint* (2019), "Even if you [women] write a very political work, and then a man writes a very political work at the same time, his narrative will be the grand narrative, it will be the narrative of the commentary on a country, or a culture, and it would speak to contemporary issues, whereas your narrative will be one woman's experience." (Goyal) This once again reifies Kandasamy's conscious attempt as a poet to think through not just her own experiences and identity as a Dalit Woman but also poetry as a vehicle for performative iterations and exploration into ideas to usher in transformations. Noted scholar and political thinker Gopal Guru while ruminating on discriminative pedagogic structures in "For Dalit History Is Not Past But Present" writes, "What irritates upper-caste academics is the discursive transgression made by a Dalit who has now moved from the empirical to the theoretical and from identity to ideas." (Guru 11). In the same volume, Kandasamy's essay "He Has Left Us Only His Words" underlines this journey from "the empirical to the theoretical" and also "identity to ideas", alluding precisely to Rohith Vemula's suicide. The exploration of ideas through new kind of poetry can be seen in Kandasamy's own creative endeavours. In this regard, we do see a continuous conscious foregrounding of the art of poetry in poems like "You don't know if you are yielding or resisting" (*Touch* 18), "He replaces poetry" (*Touch* 27), and "Mulligatawny Dreams" (*Touch* 21), where Kandasamy not only ideates about just poetry but also about her interventions and aspirations about an English Language of the future, that will be able to accommodate differences. In the recent interview with *The Mint*, she reiterates her constant awareness of English as her second language, facilitating her self-reflexive choice of expressions. (Goyal) She further maintains that her poetry has been a constant influence on her prose and non-fictional writings. She is a poet who believes in transcending norms, forms and practices through an embodied experientiality of self, and an invitation to ruminate on the art of poetry itself consciously that too in English originating from margins of everyday life in South Asia. Recent online publication and dissemination of her poem "Rape Nation" (29 Sept 2020),<sup>5</sup> written as a response to

Hathras Rape, is yet another manifestation of ekstasis, ekphrasis and kinesis, which once again asserts her ardent attempt to provoke and engage her audience into transformative thinking across diverse mediums of reception and perception. The final line of the poem "Rape Nation" is not a pessimistic statement about the inevitability of violence, but on the contrary, a prophetic invocation and reminder, "[t]his has happened before, this will happen again", until and unless we do something about it. This line, which acts as a refrain throughout the poem, can be reread as a performative enactment that cuts across multiple temporalities, identities and their engagement to the actions and events depicted. Thus, it can also be read as an instance of kinesis, which beckons our conscience so that the inevitable may not happen again. In conclusion, Meena Kandasamy's performative poetry invites us to "come unriddle" her and embark on voyages of experiences through intimate reflections on the body in kinesis and the myriad ekstatic and ekphrastic influences — aesthetic, cultural, libidinal, mythological, physical, social, which shape and animate not just the poetry, but also us as readers, co-travellers. We and her poetic vision, both traverse through the world, among people and places both foreign and domestic, familiar and unknown, to redefine poetry itself and our perception of it, in a quest towards personal and social transformation that yields justice and equanimity.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Significant among her translations are the writings and speeches of Thol. Thirumaavalavan, *Talisman: Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation* (2003) and *Uproot Hindutva: The Fiery Voice of the Liberation Panthers* (2004), Samya, Kolkata), and the poetry and fables of Tamil Eelam poet Kasi Anandan.
- <sup>2</sup> See Jaaware, Aniket and Anupama Rao. *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. Cutting across the historical, sociological, political, and moral categories, Jaaware defines caste studies from the perspective of touch, which also underlines a possibility of new socialites in the articulation of destitute literature, which in return brings about a destitute thinking.
- <sup>3</sup> See J.L. Austin's usage of the various speech acts as locutionary and illocutionary acts. Derrida further intervenes into the idea of performative in language and proposes that specific usage might foreground possibilities of transformation in language itself.
- <sup>4</sup> Bakhtin proposes communication, language and meaning making processes are inherently dialogic. Every concrete act of understanding, mentions Bakhtin, is active; it is "indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement . . . Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other" (DI, 282). This "internal dialogism" of the word brings about an encounter not with "an alien word within the object itself" but rather with "the subjective belief system of the listener" (DI, 282). See. Bakhtin, M. M. *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (C. Emerson, Trans., M. Holquist, Ed.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. 1981.
- <sup>5</sup> Originally shared on multiple online platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2020. Later published on The Wire, on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020 as "Rape Nation: Meena Kandasamy Poem on the Hathras Case".

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# Little Nationalities: Writing in English in the North-East

WATITULA LONGKUMER

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**Abstract:** This essay studies the narrative expressions in the fictional work of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*. I look at some of the region's common literary tropes, specifically the indigenous and ethnic representations, and examine how the multiple layers of linguistic expression and new narrative representation allow writers to engage with topics of oral and indigenous narrative. The essay brings the argument forward by addressing the problems of linguistic representation in the Indian postcolonial scholarship. The linguistic framework of writers like Salman Rushdie and Mitra Phukan and their idea of constructing "new Englishes" (Phukan 2013; Rushdie 1992) is adapted appropriately to work towards cultivating and maintaining a unique collective "Englishes".

**Keywords:** Indigenous literature, orality, language, postcolonial

Every man is a story. Every nation is a bristling galaxy of stories. To be able to share one's story—shouldn't that be a basic human right? Where there is denial of the freedom to tell our stories, invisible prisons are created. The denial...violates our humanity. I believe that every story has its space in History.

—Easterine Kire, "Should Writers Stay in Prison? Of Invisible Prisons"

The above quote taken from a speech of Easterine Kire, delivered at the International PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists) conference at Tromsø, Norway, gives a good starting point for the discourse of this essay. The quote conveys a message of writers' basic right and need to express and engage with narratives, irrespective of the kinds of material they engage with. For Easterine Kire and many other writers from the North-East, it is the claim for a narrative space that allows them to tell stories of everyday experiences (social, cultural, political) and the tribal worldview they associate with. Alongside this claim is the necessity and need for literary expression and liberation in the process of telling a story of a community. This is particularly important for these writers as the creative process often involves multiple negotiation of maintaining balance between oral and written, myth and the contemporary, tradition and modernity, the pagan and believer, local and global, and therefore compels linguistic innovation to preserve the community's narrative in written form.

This quote also relates to Homi Bhabha's essay *The Right to Narrate* in which he talks of the process of cultural translation that takes root "by propagating and protecting what [he] calls the "right to narrate"—the authority to tell stories, recount or recast histories" (Bhabha 2014). Bhabha mentions the narrative right that has been a hesitant act for some writers and makes an important remark by asserting the need to give "authority to those speech-acts that are made under pressure, those disturbed and disrupted dialogues of

humankind" (Bhabha 2014). This, to me, is a relevant exercise for contemporary writers from the North-East whose narrative is as yet to find a voice, acknowledgement and recognition outside of the geographical and discursive world of the North-East.

In this essay, I argue the necessity of finding a theoretical method that will aid in examining the aesthetic narrative of indigenous literary works of North-East. This involves translating orality into textuality, in the ironic context of having English and its global capital as its medium of communication. In carrying out such an attempt, I am cognizant of the problematic of English as a colonial language, which I address in the essay.

The essay looks at Easterine Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014). The select text is written originally in English and hence the process of translation and therefore mediation in the written form is not a conflict. I examine the linguistic pattern in the narrative of the text by borrowing the term 'transliteration' which I define, for the purpose of this essay, as the ability to create a comfortable space for shifting cultural borders and boundaries through the English language that is molded according to the individual needs of expression. Harish Trivedi's extensive contribution and engagement in translation studies leads to new perspectives on translation in relation to postcolonial societies. In his essay "Translating Culture Vs. Cultural Translation", Trivedi makes an urgent need to "protect and preserve some little space in this postcolonial-postmodernist world, where newness constantly enters through cultural translation, for some old and old-fashioned literary translation" (2005). This reflects Trivedi's concern, particularly, to the many indigenous languages of the world that are yet to be translated from the native ground and the fear of being translated "against our will and against our grain" (2005). I align myself with Trivedi's definition of translation as "an act of invention that produces a new original in another language" (Trivedi and Bassnett 1) and define 'transliteration' as a state of being able to express indigenous / ethnic lifestyle locally without having to follow a standard set of linguistic narrative.

Mitra Phukan notes a similar form of expression in her essay "Writing in English in the North East" where she talks of the several "Englishes" being forged in the work of writers in English from the region. Phukan's discussion is based on how writers' from the North-East, as compared to other Indian writers in English, exhibit a level of comfort and authority in transforming their narratives into their unique collective "Englishes" (Phukan2013). In the light of trying to ascertain what a folk or a mythical element is to the author and what may seem to be less ethnic to an outsider these writers shape the English language according to his or her own unique way, with the demands of the material that he or she is working with. Taking authors from two different states, Phukan says that the "diverse experiences of Mamang Dai and Tamsula Ao, and the cultures they write from, inevitably shape the vocabulary, the cadences, even the sentence structures of their work, because of the different languages that they call their Mother Tongues" (Phukan2013). While inventing their own form of English is a Pan-Indian postcolonial phenomenon, the writers are making this transition from the oral to the literary without the mediation of another writing tradition. The discourse on this requires examining the approach of the writers from the North-East who write with an awareness of the community's socio-political realities and the needs and expectation of the local readership.

In terms of the narrative transition from oral to written and the shift from native to a global language, I examine the linguistic documentation and expression used to engage with themes are often indigenous in nature, that extensively and often exclusively discusses community- specific indigenous knowledge and ethics. A preliminary observation affirms that, 1) using the English language tool presents a dilemma of writerly



framework that these writers have to negotiate and in doing so produce texts that represent a perspective of national culture and ideology and 2) they have to often, due to linguistic constraints, exclude elements that may be unsuitable for expressions in English.

Postcolonial studies invites challenging grounds of discourse and inclusion, especially of literary works produced from smaller region, on questions of canonicity. The problem of postcolonial studies begin from trying to define the literal meaning of the term to challenging questions on which national literatures or authors can / should be justifiably included in the postcolonial canon. This uncertainty trails to a larger discourse in postcolonial scholarship on the problem of colonial language that constitutes a strong imperialist notion, which reduces other languages as unsuitable for carrying out literary dialogue. Language is often a central question in postcolonial studies. The linguistic assertion by the colonizers for wide implementation of their native language during the period of colonialization continues to govern postcolonial spaces including the contemporary literary world. In a succinct essay on postcolonial demotion of the native language titled "Language", Jennifer Margulis and Peter Nowakoski refer to Ngugiwa Thiong'o term "cultural bomb" (qtd. in Margulis and Nowakoski 1996) which relates to Ngugi's practice of English language in Africa and his departure from writing in English. The "cultural bomb" narrates the brutal process of "erasing memories of pre-colonial cultures and history and installs the dominance of new, more insidious forms of colonialism" (Margulis and Nowakoski 1996). What it also expresses is that the act of submitting to the colonizer's language is an indirect form of negating one's own culture and allowing history to be fabricated through foreign linguistic expression. Jennifer and Peter also talk of the dominance of the colonized language and how postcolonial writers are beginning to reciprocate it:

In response to the systematic imposition of colonial languages, some postcolonial writers and activists advocate a complete return to the use of indigenous languages. Others see the language [e.g. English] imposed by the colonizer as a more practical alternative, using the colonial language both to enhance inter-nation communication...and to counter a colonial past through de-forming a "standard" European tongue and re-forming it in new literary forms. (Margulis and Nowakoski 1996)

This act of "de-forming" the European language in works of literature is a relevant exercise for contemporary writers from the North-East India or for any indigenous writer. The use of varied "Englishes", as defined by Mitra Phukan, in the narrative of literary works from the North-East is an apt reminder to deconstruct the myth of a standard language or a suitable narrative to define a 'good' work of literature. Salman Rushdie similarly proposes in working towards the idea of constructing "new Englishes". He says, "Working in new Englishes can be a therapeutic act of resistance, remaking a colonial language to reflect the postcolonial experience" (qtd. in Margulis and Nowakoski 1996) and further suggests an alternate way of deploying the colonizer's language in his book *Imaginary Homelands* (1992). He says that rather than ignoring or escaping from the use of colonial language (as Ngugi does by shifting from English to Gikuyu), the English language must be the starting point for postcolonial writers to solve problems that confront emerging independent colonies:

One of the changes [in the location of Anglophone writers of Indian descent] has to do with attitudes towards the use of English. Many have referred to the argument about the appropriateness of this language to Indian themes. And I hope all of us share the opinion that we can't simply use the language the way the British did; that it needs remaking for

our own purposes... To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free. (Rushdie 17)

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (2002) explore the ways in which writers encounter a dominant, colonial language. They describe a process that undergoes a dislocation of a standard language, which is replaced by a local variant that reflects a distinct cultural outlook. This process evaluates and exposes, through the literary texts, the history and culture of a community in a suitable English language. Ashcroft et al. use the term abrogation for such kind of delineation, which is explained as, "a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or "correct" usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning "inscribed" in the words" (37).

Literature from the North-East is largely born out of its traditional oral art form that defines the literary, socio-political and economic thought of the community. While this kind of literary narrative is new to the mainstream readers, indigenous writings across the world had always had a rich literary tradition which can be seen in the writings of Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, and part of African-American writings. In the literary works of North-East, the aspects of orality in the form of narrative comes through the cultural history evolved from a distinct account of myth and folklore. For example, Tamsula Ao's poem "Stone- people from Lungterok [meaning six stones]" talks of the genesis of the Ao Naga tribe of Nagaland from the mythical six stones, a community of tribal people who believe themselves to have emerged out of the earth. Similarly, Mamang Dai's continuity and engagement in oral tradition is maintained with a strong notion that there is always history in our words, that the jungle is not just a patch of greens, that there are voices, that the rivers are not just a flow of water and that all this has a landscape (Publishing Next 2015).

These examples inform that language is closely connected to different cultural experiences and hence, it is only important and relevant to frequently revisit, reinscribe and deauthorize the imperialist notion. The need for language to find a valid platform for literary expression, that may not necessarily or readily fit into the larger national narrative and yet is indispensable at the same time to assert the importance of minor literature, reminds us of an expression from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987): "... make language stammer, or make it 'wail,' stretch tensors through all of language, even written language, and draw from it cries, shouts, pitches, durations, timbres, accents, intensities" (104). Similarly, in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), Ngũgĩ posits that, through language people not only describe the world, but also understand themselves by it. He theorizes the close relation between language and culture in the following description:

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world ... Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (16)

Ngũgĩ uses the term mental universe in the essay to explain how "English became more than a language...and all the others had to bow before it in deference" (11). In relation to this, he expresses the negative impact on the imposition of foreign language by stating:

the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a peoples culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer. The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized. (390)

The essay further determines the impact of the imperial power structure imposed on the colonizer by exterminating the essence of local. Ngugi narrates the colonial practice at the elementary school where the imposition of the English language affects the mental conscience of the young students and explains the definite reality of annihilation of nativity of the community:

one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school...A button was initially given to one pupil who was supposed to hand it over to whoever was caught speaking his mother tongue...children were turned into witch-hunters and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one's immediate community...English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences and all other branches of learning. (386)

In "What is a Minor Literature" Deleuze and Guattari states, "A minor literature is not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language" (16). The objective of this argument is to deconstruct the idea of a major language that continues to be the central approach in classification of a good literary work. Beth Brant, an Aboriginal writer, puts a similar argument forward as she says, "Why is a white-European standard still being held up as the criteria for all writing? Why is racism still so rampant in the arts?" (qtd. in *Reading Native Literature* 8). This thought shares similar expression in the context of North-East writings that are often judged against the standard narrative technique of mainstream Indian literature. It is highly imperative to understand that a minor literature, irrespective of the language can be the start of a discourse.

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (hereafter mentioned as *WTRS*) is written in English and hence does not require translation. *WTRS* presents a narrative that allows the reader to explore a unique, almost mythopoeic, narrative of a tribal community in Nagaland. Importantly, Kire's use of words in the native language require the readers to be acquainted with the land and culture, as the mythological imagery of the book opens up to a setting that is intimately familiar to her. This familiarity of the book's narrative that is close to Kire's community and the 'English' language she chooses for expressing the ethnic elements can be interpreted as her choice of adopting the platform of literary production to registering an act of resistance. Kire's act of resistance develops in her narrative participation that denies an explanation and disassociates the task of acquainting readers to the tribal narrative.

The spirit world of the Nagas is immediately introduced in the novel and readers attend to Vilie's assuring explanation of the sleeping river which so far has only developed in his dream. This assurance affirms that the conviction of the community to the world of nature is not just a story that is passed on but is an aspect that journeys much beyond its mystic interpretation as these spiritual activities revolve around everyday lives of the people. Consider Vilie's description of the sleeping river, "When the river is asleep, it is completely still. Yet the enchantment of those minutes or hours when it sleeps is so powerful, that it turns the stones in the middle of the river bed into a charm. If you can wrest a stone from the heart of the sleeping river and take it home, it will grant you whatever it is empowered to grant you" (3). The indigenous narrative of supernatural belief, which is a significant practice among the Nagas, finds a clear expression as Vilie encounters various people, situations and places that exude the 'other' power. The unique reverence and harmony that expresses the oral tradition is captured in a section from the book as Vilie trek through the forest:

He tried to think of the rules of hospitality. If he took firewood or gathers herbs from the forest, he should acknowledge the owners. What was it his mother used to say when they had gathered herbs so many years ago? *Terhuomia peziemu*. Thanks be to the spirits...It was her way of pronouncing a prayer of thanksgiving to the provider, to *Ukepenuopfü*. (80)

Kire's narrative choice of the indigenous oral tradition come as a refusal to adopt the narrative mode of mainstream Indian novel as she emphasize on illustrating ethnic elements through her use of language, expression and themes.

The seminal book *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) mentions the political domination of the European imperialism and its effect on contemporary literature. As postcolonial study is a re-appropriation of content in language and literature, what it also does, as Ashcroft et al say, is that it replaces the hegemonic colonial discourse and rejects the process of the centre, by granting authenticity to the ones at the margins. One of the key measures to identify the problematic of the postcolonial in language and literature is to "decenter the assumptions of authority" (205) and make an essential shift in postcolonial literary theory by "re-placing of the hegemonic European discourse either by indigenous theory, the construction of 'indigeneity' and indigenous textuality—in which post-colonial theory is implicated...or by various 'strategies of subversion'". (Riemenschneider 205)

The challenge for writers from the North-East, who largely engage with local themes, is the continuous need to explain the importance of narratives that includes local essence. Writers from the region look at their embedded culture as a process of preservation and continuity of the people. This concept of continuity is essential given that the works, which can be placed under the category of realistic fiction, re-define permanence of culture and tradition. In an academic lecture titled "The Peripheral Imagination: Writing the Invisible India", Aruni Kashyap concisely talks about the narrative representation of literary texts from the region that is often more than just an imaginative story. He says:

One of the most important mediums connecting different cultures is realist fiction. More we read about a certain people, community and the nation through their fiction, closer they become for us. (The Peripheral Imagination 2012)

This is precisely why texts such as *WTRS* is important to discontinue or at least blur for once, the quest for the great (North- East) Indian novel. The brilliantly executed ethnic details set an image of Nagaland that is primeval, distinctly local and universal at the same time. A section from the novel aptly establishes this as it discusses the world of spirits and its significance to the community. We take a look where Vilie recollects the seer's advice on the significance of the spiritual world, "Take your guns with you but use it sparingly. Sometimes the struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers which you would be quite foolish to defy with gunpowder" (31). Such spirituality is expressed in the book through the mystical existence of the universe and the man's place in it where the spiritual world is recognized through the community's cultural knowledge, and its authenticity is vouched in the belief that this knowledge comes from the communal storehouse of belief. On the extensive presence of the otherworldly universe in *WTRS*, Kire defines the spiritual geography as a unique narrative to the body of her work:

The spiritual is normally not so easily defined as this or that. The book opens up a complex universe where you find territorial spirits throughout the landscape whether it is in the forests or in the fields, all a recognizable part of Naga spiritual geography. The book is also about power, and learning to exercise spiritual authority. (qtd. in Sarman)

For most indigenous communities from the North-East English is the writing language. The English that they write in is not the same English as an author from the mainland would use. Therefore, writers from North-East face challenge as they not only have a very restricted use of language but also have to find a language for the wide range of indigenous topics that often has little or no theoretical vocabulary to capture its specificity. In his review of *WTRS*, Dibyajyoti Sarma mentions an important distinction that needs to be considered as he says:

Most mainland India communities have their own languages and literature traditions. An author belonging to these communities has a tradition [of a diverse literary practice] to fall back on, whether or not the author wants to identify with it...For most Northeast authors it is a direct leap from the oral tradition to the English. (Sarman)

This leap from the oral to the English often requires scholars and writers to provide extensive footnotes and endnotes in an attempt to explain the North-East to the rest of the nation or in providing the context to the region's secessionist struggle.

In translating from oral to written or archiving the oral history in written, the thrust of these writers is not to sell North-East expression but it is a space for them to understand their own cultural distinctiveness and for the mainstream readers and scholars to be cognizant of the incompleteness of an Indian postcolonial genre without inclusion of the work from similar margins. This understanding and identification is crucial, especially for indigenous writers, as they seek a narrative to express and situate themselves in the current discourse of literary studies. Nirmala Menon's *Remapping the Indian Postcolonial Canon* (2016) reflects this approach as she seeks to establish a more representative and varied postcolonial discipline by locating the diverse literatures in "multiple postcolonial languages" (2). In relation to this she says:

for postcolonial scholars, invested in understanding and creating a theoretical discipline of Postcolonialism, it is in our interest to enrich the field in order to expand the conversation multilingually...So it is less the need of Hindi (or Bengali or Kannada) to be heard in English than the postcolonial theoretical field's necessity "to hear" differently." (145)

While Menon deepens her stakes for an inclusive linguistic diversity of postcolonial geographies I make a similar argument between North-East literature and mainstream Indian literature to establish a ground to recognize the distinct indigenous vocabulary existing in the Indian literary postcolonial spaces.

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# *Curfewed Night* and the Emergence of Kashmiri Anglophone Resistance Literature

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**Abstract:** For marginalised sections of society, literature can be an arena to express dissent and protest against societal norms. Literary texts that challenge dominant societal power relations are designated as resistance literature. Resistance literature emerges from conflict zones and seeks to oppose and subvert the dominant discourses of power and hegemonic practices. Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* signalled the beginning of such a literary genre from Kashmir by challenging hegemonic nationalist discourses on the Kashmir conflict. This paper aims to show how *Curfewed Night* falls under the scope of resistance literature and heralds a new subgenre within the canon of Indian English literature.

**Keywords:** Resistance Literature, Kashmir, Hegemony, Power, Indian English Literature.

## **Introduction: Literature as a Medium of Articulating Resistance**

One of the most enduring qualities of literature is its ability to move the sensibilities of readers and make them learn about new realities of the world. As a form of a cultural product, literature has got an inherent capability to "redefine" socio-political situations and realities (Tompkins xi). Barbara Harlow asserts that literature can also become a platform on which political struggles can be pursued (2). The role of art, and particularly literature, as a medium for expressing political dissent of marginalized people, cannot be overstated. Leon Trotsky states that "Art is an expression of man's need for a harmonious and complete life . . . which a society of classes has deprived him;" hence "a protest against reality, either conscious or unconscious, active or passive, optimistic or pessimistic, always forms part of a really creative piece of work" (56). Artistic creations, like works of literature, can address the readers' emotions directly and are hence, a potent force for social change. Terry Eagleton observes that art can "make us see," "perceive," "feel," and literature can accomplish this "with a 'naturalness,' spontaneity and experimental immediacy" (56, 83). Similarly, Ngugi wa Thiong'o asserts that "All art aims to evoke; to awaken in the observer, listener or reader emotions and impulses to action or opposition" (6). Thus, literature can enact and mobilize forces of resistance. Over time, the term "resistance" has evolved into a compelling discourse against oppression, repression, inequalities and violence; and literature has assumed a vital role by giving oppressed people a medium for voicing out their grievances. Literary texts that are specifically devoted to such issues require persistent attention; especially if they originate from a conflict zone. Barbara Harlow asserts that such texts emerge from a collective movement which engages two specific struggles at the same time. The first struggle focuses on social transformation through political liberation while the second one is a resistance the "historical and cultural record" of the conflict (6-7). This resistance arises to challenge domination and seeks to counter hegemony. The domination can be

political oppression, coercive practices like physical torture and military occupation. Similarly, hegemony deals with specific ideological frameworks and social structures which can create and sustain the situational contexts required to indoctrinate, subordinate and persuade a population to conform to specific sociopolitical conditions. This includes subtle ways to control people's thoughts and behaviour through the use of propaganda, rituals, education and media reports. It is these conditions of domination and hegemonic practices that create the context for resistance to emerge in a society (Portier-Young 23-26).

Literary texts that seek to oppose, reject, deny and challenge any form of hegemonic practice and system of domination can be designated as resistance literature. Barbara Harlow defines resistance literature as something that "calls attention to itself ... as a political and politicized activity" that is "directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production" (28-29). Harlow asserts that resistance literature should not be studied like traditional literature as it is inextricably linked to certain socio-political conditions (9). She stresses that resistance literature positions political contexts at the centre and it cannot be divorced from its historical background. Harlow adds that besides historical and political contexts, it is also imperative to assess authorial intention in resistance texts because the politics inside the text is its most vital feature – "the theory of resistance literature is in its politics" (30). The Kashmiri author, Basharat Peer's Anglophone memoir, *Curfewed Night*, is significant in this regard as it contests dominant, statist discourses on the Kashmir conflict and highlights how abusive counterinsurgency practices of Indian state forces have engendered large scale human rights violations in Kashmir. By analyzing Peer's portrayal of Indian counterinsurgency operations in *Curfewed Night*, this paper argues that the text falls under the scope of resistance literature, and signals the emergence of a new subgenre within Indian English literature that seeks to subvert hegemonic, statist discourses on Kashmir.

### **The Context of Kashmir**

Kashmir has been embroiled in conflict for the last thirty years with militants fighting the Indian state forces to seize political control in the Kashmir valley. Kashmiris have long resented India's involvement in the political affairs of the Valley, and have regarded the Indian state as unjustly stifling their democratic rights by installing weak local regimes (Butt 110). The state elections of 1987, popularly considered as being rigged in favour of pro-Indian political parties, made it clear to them that the Indian government would never allow Kashmiris to control their own political destiny (Dos Santos 70). The lack of a transparent democratic political process contributed to the rise of separatist tendencies in Kashmir (Noorani 19). In 1989, young Kashmiri men initiated an armed insurgency against the Indian state and crossed the Line of Control into Pakistan to acquire weapons and "combat training" (Bose 95). After returning, they started targeting Indian establishments, security personnel and people deemed to be supportive of the Indian government (Bamzai 253). The government responded by deploying a huge number of security forces to carry out counterinsurgency operations in Kashmir, which led to the militarization of the region (Kaul 75). The counterinsurgency measures of the Indian forces, especially with regards to the civilian population, have drawn severe condemnation; Mona Bhan and others allege that state violence is justified by "claims of humanitarianism premised on principles of democracy, good governance, development, and rule of law" (14). The Indian forces were accused of committing human rights violations in the form of "extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, enforced



disappearances, torture, and sexual assault” (Dos Santos 77). Shubh Mathur informs that national security laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), and Disturbed Areas Act (DAA) ensured that the forces are able to indulge in such actions with impunity (45,133).

Regularized exposure to violence served to suppress Kashmiri civilian society, and the use of extremely coercive military tactics ensured that the Indian state does not lose political control in the region (Chatterjee et al. 51). But, the government has maintained that a “low intensity conflict” is raging in Kashmir and militarization is necessary to neutralize the threats of militancy (Schofield 186). Chatterjee asserts that the government’s practice of labelling Kashmiri protestors as dangerous or potential militants has normalized the use of violence as a tool for securing India’s political objectives (25). The consequences of militarization have been devastating for Kashmiri civilians; thousands have been killed, maimed, tortured, raped and even disappeared from under the custody of the state forces (Mathur 1). The State Human Rights Commission of Jammu and Kashmir reported that over two thousand bodies, bearing torture marks, have been discovered in unmarked mass graves; and most were identified as local residents and non-militants (South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre 20). Nevertheless, the Indian government continues to assert that these people were all either local or foreign militants who were killed while trying to cross the Line of Control (Chatterjee et al. 14, 25). The presence of the Indian security forces in close proximity unsettled the daily lives of ordinary Kashmiris. The “violent reordering of space and place” with “prisons, bunkers, barracks, concertina wires, and checkpoints” disrupted civilian movement and resulted in daily “confinement” inside their “homes and neighbourhoods during periods of state-imposed curfew” (Bhan et al. 4). Thus, the conflict has brought immense suffering in the lives of local civilians who have to live under the shadows of both the Indian state forces and the militants.

The Indian state has consistently maintained that militarization of the Valley is necessary for ensuring national security and that Pakistan is responsible for creating instability in the region; the government stresses that large numbers of Pakistani militants infiltrate into Kashmir and cause disturbances along with a few misguided local Kashmiri youths (Butt 118-122). However, this stance has drawn immense criticism; Bhan and others argue that the Indian government has reduced the “Kashmiri resistance” to be a “handiwork of external forces” and deny “the local origins of the movement” (7). A battle of narratives has emerged as a consequence, while the Indian government maintains that militarization is essential for ensuring peace, others regard it as a military occupation (Schofield 174). Under such circumstances, literature can be an ideal medium to voice the concerns and struggles of ordinary Kashmiris and provide us with a deeper understanding of the situation that civilians face in the conflict zone.

### *Curfewed Night*

Basharat Peer’s memoir *Curfewed Night* (2008), which is written in the form of a novel, details the common Kashmiri civilians’ perspectives on the Kashmir conflict and highlights the pitiful conditions that they lived through, during the 1990s when militancy was at its peak. Pankaj Mishra opines that the text reflects the Kashmiri angst against Indian society and prescribes everyone to read it as it “challenges” their “most cherished beliefs in democracy, rule of law and the power of individual conscience” (*Curfewed Night*). Javeria Khurshid describes the text as a “cry” on “behalf” of the Kashmiri people voicing their

"gut-wrenching" stories of sufferings; it "captivates ... readers into pondering over the devastation, and coerces them to ask ... whether this desolation was necessary?" (3). Being a Kashmiri himself, Peer had witnessed first hand the transformation of the social terrain of the Valley when the insurgency began and his memoir reflects his personal experiences. *Curfewed Night* is seminal in its depiction of the abusive practices that Kashmiris had to endure (like restrictions on their movements, shootouts at protest marches, sexual and physical torture, et cetera) at the cost of their personal and psychological lives. Peer's narrative tone and style are textured by rhetoric and a subtle affect which amplifies the emotional turmoil that Kashmiris suffered because of the mischance of their fates. As a cultural production, the text provides Kashmiris new avenues for depicting their history. Suvir Kaul feels that for Kashmiris, such literary expressions make the "experiences of violence central to their political commentary" and allows them to rethink about their history and struggle. Thus, Peer indulges in a "crucial form of activism" that challenges the "meager international attention" which Kashmiris had received previously (Kaul 73, 79). He seeks to develop a "critical consciousness among Kashmiris" about new ways to narrate their history that can counter "the state's efforts to silence alternative narratives" by allowing only "hegemonic forms of history and memory" to thrive (Bhan et al. 18). In this regard, Aaliya Anjum and Saiba Varma insist that the Indian media's representations of the conflict "delegitimize" the concerns of Kashmiris and the "non-accountability for years of human rights abuse" makes them think that the Indian media "can't feel or represent" Kashmiri "sentiments" (13). Basharat Peer puts an end to this marginalized representation by disputing dominant statist discourses, thereby helping readers perceive the Kashmir insurgency in a new light.

The very title "*Curfewed Night*" is suggestive of the horrifying experiences of civilians during the sudden, incessant curfews that the Indian forces would impose to curb militancy. Through a series of interviews and personal recollections, Peer illustrates how Kashmir deteriorated from a relatively peaceful, beautiful valley to a conflict-ridden land where people are ruled by fear and uncertainty. He confesses that he had written the text to fill, what he perceived was, a huge vacuum in the literary world regarding the Kashmiri experience. While people from other conflict-ridden areas, like Palestine or Tibet, had given literary expressions to their sufferings, Peer was dismayed by the lack of similar endeavours from Kashmir (95). Hence, the ground realities of how the state policies affect ordinary civilians remain unknown to the outside world; and only the filtered, state discourses are presented through the media (Hakeem 103-5). Peer feels compelled to fill this gap by writing about the untold "memories and stories" of the miseries of the Kashmiri people; he hopes to demonstrate "what happened to families whose kin had died in the conflict" and who had neither the financial nor political power to seek justice (166).

### **Representation of Indian Counterinsurgency Operations in *Curfewed Night***

Peer fondly recalls the pre-insurgency period in Kashmir when crimes like murder were almost non-existent (3), but he had also sensed social "alienation and resentment" against India and the "symbols of Indian nationalism" like the Indian flag and national anthem (11). He recounts that Kashmiris, across all sections of society, were united in their demand for secession after the 1987 elections and civilian protests were organised against the Indian government throughout 1988 and 1989. In late 1989, the insurgency finally began when their "bottled up resentment" exploded, and militants received

"immense popular support" and were "seen as heroes" (13). Peer was just thirteen in 1990 when, at a civilian protest gathering, the Indian troops opened fire and killed about fifty unarmed protestors (14). This incident, known as the Gawkadal massacre, left indelible impressions on the Kashmiri psyche – as revealed by the interviews that Peer takes.<sup>1</sup> A hawker, who was present at the time, informs that he can arrange meetings with "women whose men were killed" and show photos of the massacre, provided Peer brings a camera to record his statements and broadcast it on national media (119). His condition reflects how common Kashmiris wanted the world to learn about their suppression. Peer records the experience of a survivor, Farooq Wani, who informs him that the only intention of the troopers was to kill protestors; he specifically recalls one "murderous officer" who had found him alive and fired a "volley of bullets" at him. The effect of such incidents is severe, as Peer observes in Wani who was still overwhelmed by those traumatic memories (120). The text informs that such incidences were not isolated and there were a "series of other massacres" in 1990 which made Srinagar a "city of protests" and a "city of massacres" (122).

Widespread incidents of forced custodial detentions terrified civilians. Peer mentions that the paramilitary would barge inside people's homes at night and arrest young men, many of whom went permanently missing from the forces' detention camps while others suffered inhumane torture (14). Random curfews were often imposed, for indefinite periods, which restricted people indoors and prevented them from even venturing out to buy grocery supplies or visit hospitals in case of emergencies (47). Curfews also cut people off from family members who were outside or lived separately and since access to personal telephones was uncommon at the time so civilians had constant anxiety for their loved ones (15). Civilian protests against such infringement of rights were futile and were crushed with violence (Butt 112). Kashmir was pockmarked with army camps after thousands of additional troops were stationed there, and locals were ordered to carry identity cards with them whenever they went outside. Soldiers could stop them anywhere and check their cards, thereby restricting their freedom of movement. Peer observes that a soldier stopping anyone "meant trouble" as anything could happen: a random "identity check, a possible beating or a visit to the nearest army camp," civilians could even be forced to perform menial labour (48). He mentions an incident when his uncle Bashir was assaulted by a soldier, who had inquired about his native village, to which he replied Islamabad instead of Anantnag, Islamabad being the local name of Anantnag. Bashir was psychologically scarred after the incident; he would shudder at the sight of soldiers even when they came to his shop to buy utilities (49).

Peer describes the atmosphere of terror, desolation, and anguish that permeated the lives of civilians:

Fear and chaos ruled Kashmir ... Fathers wished they had daughters instead of sons. Sons were killed every day. Mothers prayed for the safety of their daughters. People dreaded knocks on their doors at night. Men and women who left home for the day's work were not sure they would return; thousands did not. Graveyards began to spring up everywhere, and marketplaces were scarred with charred buildings. (30-31)

When someone joined militancy, his family faced severe harassment from the soldiers who would raid their houses, threaten and beat up innocent family members, and molest their women (38). If militants visited their families or were spotted around a civilian locality, security forces would burn down people's houses in that area (44). Such incidents would be followed by multiple cordon-and-search operations, locally referred to as

"crackdowns," where civilians would be detained outside while their homes would be thoroughly searched.<sup>2</sup> Peer shares his own experience of a crackdown when the army had cordoned off their village and ordered all the men to "assemble in the hospital lawns by six." The women had to "stay at home" and open "the doors of every room and every cupboard" (50), as soldiers invaded their privacy to look for "militants, guns, or ammunition." The men had to present their identity cards and go through an identification parade in front of an informer who would identify militants (51). Peer recalls that his heart "galloped" when he faced the informer who, fortunately, did not recognize him. However, his sixteen-year-old neighbour, Manzoor, was detained for further interrogation as he had often engaged in casual conversations with militants (52). The physical torture that Manzoor had endured during his detention was apparent in his limping gait and the "bruises" that were "all over his body" (55). Peer reveals the extent of such custodial brutality when he says that parents of unmarried girls were worried as "most of the dead ...were young men" and others had "deforming injuries, depressions, and non-existent careers" which lowered their chances of finding suitable grooms for their daughters (107). Every Kashmiri man, young and old, was a target for the security forces and the soldiers were "particularly suspicious of anyone with any kind of facial hair" (55), the fear of torture was such that older men stopped dyeing their hair black as grey hair made men "less of a suspect" (56).

The most "infamous torture centre" in Kashmir was Papa 2, where hundreds of detainees, unable to withstand third-degree torture, died, while those who survived "were wrecks" (137).<sup>3</sup> Peer narrates the experience of Shafi, who was detained there for seven months. Shafi had to share with twenty men a bloodstained room that had no toilet, and prisoners had to use polythene bags to relieve themselves. The lights were always switched on, and during interrogations, they had to stare at "very bright bulbs" (141). Consequently, Shafi almost lost his eyesight. He could not afford surgery, which reduced his chances of finding employment or getting married. He informs Peer that soldiers would role a "heavy concrete roller" on the prisoners' legs, and give them cigarette burns (142). In what Shafi calls "psychological torture," prisoners were forced to chant pro-Indian slogans daily or face more torture. Another detainee, Ansar remarks that one does not "live a normal life after that torture" (143). He reveals that prisoners would be stripped, tied up and submerged into a "ditch filled with kerosene oil and red chilli powder," and the soldiers would burn their bodies with stoves to draw out information (143). Besides physical and psychological torture, prisoners were also subjected to sexual torture – copper wires were used to give high voltage electrical shocks to their genitals. Ansar claims that this resulted in the loss of fertility, and many "could not marry" (143). He, himself, had to get medical treatment for urinary tract infections for two years before getting married. Peer observes that such "attacks on their masculinity had left them vulnerable" forever (144). Besides impotence, electric shocks also led to permanent kidney damage in many prisoners (144). Sexual violence was also perpetrated on women on a massive scale. Peer interviews Mubeena Ghani who was raped by an "unknown number of BSF men" on the night of her marriage, after paramilitary forces shot at the bus carrying her wedding party (154). Mubeena was bleeding from gunshot wounds when she and her chambermaid got raped (54). Rashid, her husband, survived with five bullets lodged in his back but half of his family had died. Mubeena was, subsequently, ostracized by her in-laws who saw her as a "bad omen," and Rashid could not work for almost a year. Traumatized by her experience, Mubeena still gets "shivers at the sight of the uniform" (155).

Peer mentions that thousands of men had gone missing “after being arrested by the military,” and was referred to as “disappeared persons.” Instead of setting up inquiries to look into these disappearances, the government claimed that “the missing citizens...have joined militant groups” (131). Their family members have, in general, given up hope but some still fight for justice. These people, like the seventy-year-old Noora, organize protest gatherings and congregate in parks in Srinagar, holding banners and placards. Noora’s son had been taken away by the paramilitary eight years ago; he had gone out to play cricket and has been missing since (132). Similarly, Javed, the sixteen-year-old speech-impaired son of Parveena Ahangar, was “taken away from their house in 1990 during a raid” (132). Ahnagar denied the government’s offer for monetary compensation if “she accepted that her son was killed in unknown circumstances in the conflict” (133). Peer reveals that the rules regarding government compensation are questionable since the government only provides relief if the family claims that their men were killed in “militancy related action,” meaning that they were killed by militants (162). There are no provisions for relief if security forces killed them. Many people were forced by their financial conditions to accept the compensation by, falsely, claiming that their men were militants killed in action (163). Peer cites the example of his relative, Gulzar, who was a schoolboy when the army killed him. He had, unknowingly, made fun of an army officer’s son at school and, the following evening, soldiers took him from his house to a cowshed and “detonated a mine” (165). They claimed that Gulzar was a militant who had mistakenly blasted that mine. Gulzar’s family was forced to accept this statement as they needed the government’s compensation. Peer informs that the forces also used innocent civilians to apprehend militants. He cites the experience of Shameema, whose seventeen-year-old son was used as a human-bomb by the Indian army and killed. During an encounter with militants, the forces picked up both her sons, Bilal and Shafi, from outside their home. At the encounter site, Shameema found Bilal with the troops, Bilal informed her that the soldiers had sent Shafi inside the “militants’ house with a mine in his hands” (169). The soldiers physically assaulted Shameema and tried to send Bilal inside the house too, but Shameema managed to escape with him. While leaving, she saw the soldiers “push an old man towards the house with the mine in his hands” (169). Bilal became “psychologically disturbed” after the incident, and would get agitated “every time Shafi is mentioned,” forcing Shameema to give her son intoxicants to calm him down (170).

Peer’s portrayal of these abusive Indian counterinsurgency methods reveals how Kashmiris lived with constant threats to their lives, as women may get raped and men can be beaten, detained, tortured, killed or go missing. The resultant psychological damage of these abuses is intense mental trauma and victims are forced to relive their moments of pain throughout their lives; justice continues to elude them and compels them to accept their fate.

### **Situating *Curfewed Night* as a Resistance Text**

Resistance literature contests hegemonic narrative discourses by writing back to dominant social structures about marginalized peoples’ experiences. It exposes societal oppression by offering a self-defining narrative that articulates regional sentiments, personal trauma, and seeks answers and accountability. Writers of resistance literature “consider it necessary to wrest that expropriated historicity back, reappropriate it for themselves in order to reconstruct a new world-historical order” (Harlow 33). Thus, resistance literature is a repository of “popular memory and consciousness” (Harlow

34), that facilitates more nuanced analyses of historical issues affecting people. In *Curfewed Night*, Peer narrates popular memories of oppression and thus, creates a literary space to preserve them. He uses contextual resistance, to represent the experienced realities of civilians, to argue against statist discourses that advocate the militarization of Kashmir.<sup>4</sup> Thus the text participates in the Kashmiris' struggle for demilitarization of their homeland. Written in English, the text appeals to a global audience to witness its testimonies and rethink about Kashmir. Like all resistance literature, the text focalizes on the marginalization of ordinary civilians and positions them in the middle of the narrative. Peer's visceral detailing denounces the injustices meted out to Kashmiris in the name of counterinsurgency. The recurring trope of using historical contexts to highlight human rights abuses, allows him to create an alternative narrative about the Kashmir conflict which engenders the context for transformation in both the readers and the subjects of the text. Thus, *Curfewed Night* emerges as a resistance text that demonstrates the power of literature to subvert hegemonic narratives and demand social changes. The text is a pioneer, in this regard, because since its publication in 2008, several other Kashmiri authors (like Mirza Waheed, Shahnaz Basheer, Nayeema Mahjoor, Siddhartha Gigoo, et cetera) have come forward and narrated their experiences of the conflict in Anglophone novels. These authors also contested other dominant discourses on pertinent issues of the conflict and enabled readers gain a deeper view of the troubled sociopolitical terrain of Kashmir.

### Conclusion

Resistance literature speaks out against dominant, hegemonic discourses and wrests back "control over cultural production" (Harlow 12). *Curfewed Night* enables readers to gain a more nuanced understanding of Kashmir's ground realities and become more aware of the conflict. It is the first Indian Anglophone text, to emerge from the conflict-ridden land of Kashmir, which highlights the severe abuses that Kashmiris suffered after the militarization of the Valley. By speaking out for those whose voices had, otherwise, become insignificant and muted, Basharat Peer appeals for justice to be offered to those who have resiliently endured oppression. Through his narrative, Peer contests statist discourses which advocate stringent militarization, and pleads people to learn about how ordinary Kashmiris have suffered since 1990. Thus, in its narrative content and intent, *Curfewed Night* falls under the scope of resistance literature and it seeks to make readers unlearn preconceived notions about Kashmir and see the conflict from a more humanitarian and insightful perspective.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Gawkadal massacre, see Schofield 148.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on crackdowns, see Bose 125.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on Papa 2, see Mathur 15.

<sup>4</sup> Dean Rader discerns two forms of resistance in texts: contextual and compositional. Contextual resistance is at a thematic level, where the text's central message asserts defiance to a dominant narrative; and compositional resistance is at the text's structural level and relates to narrative elements like plot structure (Rader 5).

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# The Spatial Politics in the Craft of Postcolonial Indian Muslim Women Novelists: Reading Shama Futehally's *Tara Lane*, Samina Ali's *Madras in Rainy Days* and Anjum Hasan's *The Cosmopolitans*

SABREEN AHMED

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**Abstract:** In the large framework of Indian English Fiction, writings by Muslim women novelists often find lesser engagements of critical enquiry and readership outside the marginalized domain of minority narrative studies. This paper locates the discursive positioning of the postcolonial Muslim women subjects in the selected texts in their traditional space in conformation to patriarchal structures, as well as postmodern space which tends to subvert these foundational structures. In the postmodern space the female subject is out of zenana but her fragmented self is still within its ideological barriers. The leading women in the texts rather than adhering to their religiosity yearn for liberation and seek authentic self-expression which at most instances is only partially allowed. The issue at hand is to understand on the one hand their religious identity as Muslim woman while at the same time to grasp the specificity of their claims to act as modern subjects situated in the time of political and cultural modernity. The selected works in this context are *Tara Lane* by Shama Futehally, Samina Ali's *Madras in Rainy Days* and Anjum Hasan's *The Cosmopolitans* that dwell with the nuances of conforming and combating restrictive discourses that define womanhood and female space of the zenana.

*Keywords:* Zenana, Muslim woman, Space, Religion

In the large and expanding sphere of Indian English Fiction, writings by Muslim women novelists often find lesser engagements of critical enquiry and readership outside the marginalized domain of minority narrative studies. This paper would try to locate the discursive positioning of the postcolonial Muslim women subjects in some selected texts in terms of their traditional patriarchal space as well as postmodern space. In the postmodern space the female subject is out of the zenana but her fragmented self is still within its ideological barriers. The leading women in the texts under discussion would rather yearn for liberation and seek authentic self-expression, however partially they are allowed, than simply adhere to conventional religiosity. The issue at hand is to understand on the one hand their religious identity as Muslim women while grasping at the same time the specificity of their claims to act as modern subjects on the other. The selected works in this context are *Tara Lane* by Shama Futehally, Samina Ali's *Madras in Rainy Days* and Anjum Hasan's *The Cosmopolitans* which dwell on the nuances between the states of conforming to and yet combating the restrictive patriarchal discourses that define womanhood and female space of the zenana.



The term “zenana”, according to the latest online edition of *Oxford English Dictionary* is derived from the Persian word *Zan* and Urdu word *Zanana* which means woman or pertains to women. It is primarily a Muslim social institution under which a separate private sphere is assigned to woman within a household. Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* argued that with capitalism space appears entirely devoid of all social relationships—a sort of thing of all things (Lefebvre 90). Further if space is considered in its most “fetishized, mystified vanishing point, space becomes a non-thing an empty, static plane upon which people act and events unfold” (90). The first novel under discussion is Shama Futehally’s *Tara Lane* where space, society and sanctions for the Muslim female are seen specifically from a classist perspective of the authorial voice. Shama Futehally wrote her first novel, *Tara Lane*, in 1993 where she portrays an account of the decline of the feudal values of old middle class family order in an upper class Muslim household in Bombay in the poised manner of her chiseled prose. *Tara Lane* is situated in the post-independence India, unlike former Indian Muslim women’s novels such as Atia Hossein’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and Zeenuth Futehally’s *Zohra*. The novel published in 1993, is however, ambiguous regarding the time span of the narrative, which begins with Tara’s childhood and ends with her as a young wife and mother, but clues in the narrative, particularly the references to the “Licence Raj” era during Tara’s marriage, suggest that it is set somewhere between the period from the 1950s to the 1980s (Barley 97). The geographic locale is the busy city of Bombay with its rapid industrialization depicted through the subjective vision of the central protagonist Tahera. Though silhouetted against an Islamic setting the overtly restrictive strictures of Islam for women like purdah is absent in the novel. The institution of zenana doesn’t have a physical presence here but its spatial nuances are very much visible.

Though none of the women characters discussed by Shama Futehally belongs to the purdah society and had good access to education, they have no financial independence or any say in commercial matters. Even without the confinement of the purdah or zenana, femininity has its own spatial boundaries as reflected in the narrative. The author shows the rise of trade unionism and the decline of aristocracy of a rich Muslim family. Spatial dynamics in this novel revolves round the place, i.e. Tara Lane, from which the title comes, a neighbourhood in Bombay which becomes a site of postcolonial and postmodern transitional space. This space is “betwixt and between economic institutions” but is best described by the adjective “liminal” (Soja 122). The central protagonist attached her identity with the place in *Tara Lane*:

But dusty though it was it was my lane. All through childhood I felt a special affinity with it because we shared a name. My name Tahera was often shortened to Tara the name of the lane. (9)

Brought up in an affluent environment cocooned with luxury, the external world posed a threat to Tahera. Born in an industrial family, Tahera’s upbringing had a strong colonial reverberation. It is noteworthy that their chief domestic helps were Christians - Samuel and his wife Katreen - revealing a sense of religious tolerance within the family norms.

The Lacanian principle of the law of the father seems to be the governing tenet in Shama Futehally’s narrative, despite the fact that her female characters are devoid of the less liberal strictures of Islam like zenana and purdah because of their anglicized life style. Tahera as a child was deeply influenced by her father and almost trusted him blindly as Shama Futehally’s text shows:

It was surprising, really, considering how entirely he could be trusted, that I was so very nervous of our being collectively and unwittingly in the wrong. Perhaps I felt an unconscious fear because the source of all good seemed to be so entirely my father. (30)

Her altruistic father offered a helping hand to the needy workers and from him Tahera imbibed the ideals of socialism from her very childhood. But with marriage things changed despite a happy beginning. The dialectics of power in her conjugal life fixed her to an enclosed space where even freedom of thought was not allowed. Tahera was bonded to the eternal duties of wifehood unquestioningly. The narrative depicts her introspections as a kind of irritation, like a “worm” pestering her mind, which she wished had crawled “underground” enabling her to “pretend that it didn’t exist”. She apprehended her ideological difference with her husband might disrupt the comfort zone between them. She grew up with the notion that finance and politics were beyond the domain of woman and she should be satisfied with the private realm of her home and the kitchen:

These were uncharted territories, looking at the blue flame on the stove, trying to fix my mind on turning over the *samosas*. Nothing in our time together, in the banter, in the freedom of knowing that nothing was wrong, had prepared for a moment when I would need to ask a question indirectly, when I alone would know the meaning of the answer, when the exchange was really between me and myself. (*Tara Lane* 85)

Tahera’s socialistic ideals could never rebel against the hardcore capitalist drive of Rizwan despite their inherent differences. Shama Futehally shows no regret in Tahera in giving up her idealism by choosing defeat in the face of her husband’s strict manners of dealing with the factory staff, after an initial clash of ideals she remarks:

He turned to me with strange hurt movement. Then he pulled me to him, and with a sob of defeat I went back to my territory, which was so much smaller than I thought it was, I was glad to go back. (87)

The spatial dimension of the women in the novel had a fixed locus. The public sphere of the factory was outside the private sphere of the women in Tahera’s household, except those of the working class. The author shows that much information regarding the factory strikes was known to the maids, while the ladies of the house remained completely ignorant about the imminent financial fallout. When Tahera rebuked Rizwan for bribing the trade union leader to end the strike his male ego couldn’t bear the ignominy of being judged by his wife. Her confined space in wifehood didn’t allow her any agency to the commercial dealings to curb her husband’s dishonesty.

The later part of the novel focuses on the financial crisis that faced the family owing to the union trouble in the factory. To deal with the situation Tahera wished to take up a teaching job but her family status posed hurdle as it seemed improper for a woman of her class to look for such an insignificant job. Her mother unaccustomed to face such monetary tension had a nervous breakdown, chiefly because she couldn’t choose a proper gift to offer at her niece’s marriage. To highlight the irony of the situation the narrative shifts to the crisis in their servants Katreen and Samuel’s life, as they had to bear the tragic death of their infant son. The loss of the house and the decline of the family business, in this novel, is a metaphor for the decline of “old” middle class values in modern India and a period of transition and change socially, culturally and economically. Contrasting the relatively public spaces of the servants’ home with that of Tahera’s family’s privacy, in particular the ability to shut off rooms and to close off space is associated with power. In the spatial terrain it is the working class women who had more agency than the women

of higher classes. Tahera needed to speak, to rebel, but her voice was muffled by the "quilt" of her role as a married woman, circumscribing her to the ideological zenana with no space for freedom and she was bound to be contented in the limited agency allowed to her. The novel ends looking not to the future, but back to Tara's childhood, taking the reader full circle into a nostalgic reminiscence of the grand space of her former home.

Samina Ali's *Madras in Rainy Days* the second novel under analysis for this paper explores the hidden codes of sexuality behind the veil which serves a metaphor for hideous masquerades and alternate freedom. Samina Ali an Indian American novelist explores the different sexual realms that a Muslim woman inhabits by being in purdah in modern times in her debut novel *Madras in Rainy Days*. The novel tries to present the picture of purdah more as a freedom for a young woman rather than a restriction, as it allows her exclusive possession of her body space in hiding it from external eye. The novel also explores issues of alternate sexuality in the conservative society of Hyderabad.

*Madras in Rainy Days* opens with the celebration of a wedding between Layla, a nineteen-year-old college student, and Sameer, an ambitious engineer which depict in details the social protocols of the zenana sub-culture. The five-day ceremony lush with the rich traditions of the families' Muslim culture vividly dwells into the elaborate marital festivities within the zenana culture in the Indian walled city of Hyderabad. Behind the scenes of the opulent festivities, the central protagonist was under an emotional constraint in view of her ensuing life with a man below her social standards. Layla, who has spent most of her life in the United States, is deeply conflicted about her parents' desire to have her participate in the traditional arranged marriage. The narrative succinctly depicts her cultural trap as she could feel at home neither in India, where she is viewed with suspicion as an outsider, nor in America, where her parents deliberately segregated her from modern culture. "I was supposed to inhabit America without being inhabited by it," she says. Her sexual encounter with an American boy Nate is serious enough as a transgression considering the restrictive social milieu where she had to live after marriage. The narrative shows that Layla was under a psychological conflict regarding her previous sexual experience with her American lover which had resulted in conception and subsequent prolonged menstrual bleeding due to forced abortion. She feared if the truth becomes public, she will be rejected by Sameer and more dangerously her father a staunch patriarch that he is will abuse and even kill her. But contrary to her apprehensions, Sameer used her menstrual blood stains as a sign of consummated marriage before his family to camouflage his own sexual lack. Layla successfully conceals her previous relationship (and the resulting pregnancy and miscarriage) long enough for her to fit into the traditional structures of Sameer's family. Indeed, much to Layla's surprise, she finds herself attracted to this husband she did not choose and does not yet love. While Layla despite her cross cultural trap moves deeper into the traditional world wanting to find a home and security that had so far eluded to her because of her broken parental home, Sameer is desperate to flee the confines of the old city and show her the hybridized world of contemporary India, where people have moved out of their traditional crunches. He makes her wear jeans underneath her purdah when they go out so that she can fling it off after crossing the traditional confines. When Sameer disappears for days on end and fails to reciprocate Layla's sexual attraction, she suspects some truth behind it, until she finds his friend Naved who reveals the secret of their gay love. Layla decided to leave Sameer, but rather than being accepted back into her parental home her own family asked Layla to accept Sameer's tendencies as a type of recreational sex which would change with her presence.

This exposes the gender discrimination rampant within conservative families, where the sexual incapacities or homosexual behaviour of a male subject has also to be shrouded by the female within her codes of honor and shame. Naved's meeting with Sameer under the guise of a veiled woman is symbolic of the same.

*Madras in Rainy Days* is about same sex desire and the problematic of the same in conventional societies. The story makes visible the default mechanisms/assumptions of heterosexuality within Indian postcolonial theorizing. "Gendering women to fit into a neo-Victorian companionate marriage also calls for their desexualization which affects *satis* and the *zanaan*" (Patel 177). This desexualization continues to infect current discussions - literary and otherwise — of Indian women. Here Samina Ali narrativizes the opposite situation, i.e. the sexual and social ramifications of a gay relationship in the life of a Muslim woman. This sensual novel is set at the start of India's monsoon season, when the combination of torrential rains and stifling heat combine to create an almost suffocating atmosphere. The novel, with its detailed descriptions of confining interiors and its emphasis on women's lives in the home, effectively communicates the claustrophobic feeling within a real zenana.

Ali tries to make a comment on the cultural invasion of the female body by using Layla as a metaphor-- first her body was explored by an American and later partially by her Indian gay husband. It is chiefly because of her unfulfilled sexual desires, more than the betrayal for being married to a gay for which Layla leaves Sameer. *Madras in Rainy Days* offers readers an illuminating portrayal of a young Muslim woman's cultural crisis. The novel is a subtle conglomeration of the tremendous pull of the traditional world of Islam with its moral confinements and the attractive and powerful potentials and pitfalls of contemporary globalized world in the self-journey of Layla. The end shows Layla walking around the city of Hyderabad in her burqa after finally leaving her husband, enjoying her freedom behind the veil within its little space of anonymity. The veil makes her be in public space yet remain absent from public eye by its covers; it is an alternate moment of liberation for Layla. She prefers to remain in the traditional space of the Indian society within the confines of real/ imaginary zenana as a single woman rather than moving out to the liberal diasporic space of America with her gay husband bound in the terms of a companionate marriage. The religiously constructed body space of the purdah evoked in the novel stands as a sign of 'heteronormative' enclosure which is stabilized through the spatial boundaries between interior and exterior, domestic and public, the body and the house in an embodied experience.

In the third novel, the author Anjum Hasan has very little or almost nothing in her plot that calls for reading the construction of a Muslim women subject. Anjum Hasan has the brilliance as a writer to deal with her craft without sentimentality with Jane Austen-like command over form. Her postmodern novel *The Cosmopolitan* exposes the fate of art, artist and the art critic in a contemporary world of complex human relations yet sustaining orthodox values. It is rare to find someone with a Northeast connection who defies the confined regional boundary and transcends a reflection of her faith as suggested by her Muslim name in her writings. She is just an Indian writer writing from Bangalore about the layered urban spaces of contemporary society. The seemingly Muslim name of the central character Qayenaat is deceiving at the first instance for the reader, for her character's father's surname is later revealed in the plot as Gupta. However the nuances of fanatic restrictions imposed in the realm of art by both Muslim and Hindu clerics remain a strong background around the circumstances of Qayenaat's narrative about

unconventional art and Indian society. Qayenaat's friend Sara Mir, a Kashmiri married to a Punjabi in Bangalore is a stock image of the sophisticated feudal class of the connoisseurs of art in post-colonial India who invested their fortune to maintain a taste of good art. The only Muslim female character in the novel is the talented artist Nur Jahan who despite remaining hidden to public glare had to bear the brunt of the fanatics for her bold representations for which she was accused of sedition for defiling Indian womanhood. The narrative maintains a mystery behind Nur Jahan's identity and draws a nexus between her nude paintings to the communal riots in Bombay:

She signed her canvases 'NJ', and was rumoured to be Muslim, so someone nicknamed her Nur Jahan after the self-possessed 16<sup>th</sup>-century Queen. Soon the story had freed itself from the reality altogether and became one about a god-fearing, namaazi woman who led a double life, painting her dirty pictures in secret". (*The Cosmopolitans*, p. 13)

The later part of the novel deals with a murder mystery. Moreover the complexity in the plot is aroused by a stolen painting of Nur Jahan who was eventually killed by the fanatics. Nur Jahan is never shown in the novel as a full bodied character inside the confines of a zenana. The narrator only keeps the reader informed that the artist Nur Jahan lives a reclusive life in Hyderabad with her husband and two kids after the debacle over her amorous paintings. But she steals the center stage of the discussion in the Anjum Hasan's narrative by being invisible as an artist while revealing in absentia through her immortal art "Painting of Sorrow" hidden secretly by Qayenaat following a series of detective thrill in the novel that remained despite Nur Jahan's fatal end at the hand of the fanatics. She was brutally killed with every finger of her hand being chopped off, and the media outrages by fellow artists belonging to Sufia, the Secular United Front of Indian Artists mentioned in the novel were not strong enough for giving her justice by penalizing the culprits. Nur Jahan's murder reflected an ancient pattern of rebellion and revenge as reflected in Anjum Hasan's narrative that caused terrible set back to true connoisseurs of art like her central protagonist Qayenaat who still held an idyllic cosmopolitan belief for a world to be a better place without any religion and its rigid sanctions. The novel ends with the post liberal triumphant artist Baban Reddy's exhibition dedicated in the memory of Nur Jahan the dead uncelebrated artist. It is with his exhibition of his exclusive art work *Nostalgia* that Anjum Hasan began the narrative sequence, enmeshing it with the relations of the heterodox female artist or female admirer of art with the polarized patriarchal society through the complications in the plot of passionate love, childhood tantrums and mid-life stasis chiefly expressed through Qayenaat's consciousness, finally brought to a narrative closure by grappling on the anonymity of the artist and his/her anonymous audience through Baban's paintings drawn in memory of Nur Jahan.

In all the above novels that I have taken for discussion, it is evident that these Muslim women writers focus more on their identity as an Indian rather than their Islamic identity. Even though the first two of these novels are located in an Islamic setting, the central female protagonist in all of them envisions a syncretic and secular ideal of nationhood and individual identity foregrounding the composite Indian culture, Islam being an integral part of the same. *Tara Lane* captures the transition of the Muslim feudal class to the emerging new Muslim middle class with its visible repercussions in the zenana system while *Madras in Rainy Days* contemporizes the present dilemma of an Indian Muslim female subject in dealing with globalized tendencies in a traditionally restrictive social space. The real zenana, a form of indigenous spatiality in the colonial sphere indeed

disappeared with the fall of feudalism in the postcolonial times. Yet the hypostatized presence of the gendered spatial orientations of the zenana existed in “states of mind” in the realm of the imaginary. Purdah or veil became an important marker of Muslim identity which visibly set the Muslims as a social, cultural and religious community apart from other Indians as well as the colonizers in the pre independence India with continued cultural remnants. There is a complex value system in tradition that defines the limits of freedom, demarcates the confines and outlines the margins. As Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin have it these are the margins which confer anonymity and erase selfhood, the margins which limit and stultify and annihilate (*Margins of Erasure* vii). However, the Muslim female is not the central figure in Anjum Hasan’s *The Cosmopolitans* and yet the decentered logo in her novel’s linear progress. The absence of the voice of Muslim female artist Nur Jahan’s in Anjum Hasan’s narrative and her consequent death reiterates postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak’s rhetorical question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” adjoined by postcolonial feminist Sara Suleri’s proclamation in *Meatless Days* that “there’s no woman in the Third World” (Suleri 10), which suggests ironically that third world Muslim women because of their traditional confinement are denied a visible identity metaphorically and otherwise in the public space of a cosmopolitan world of postmodernity.

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# Women and Sensorial Hegemony in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

MUHAMMAD MANZUR ALAM

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**Abstract:** This essay reads Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices* in the context of the hierarchies of human sensoria that often entail the othering of certain races, classes, or genders associated with "lower senses." The diasporic protagonist of the novel, Tilo, uses her psychic power to choose spices of certain smells and tastes that rid people of their troubles and diseases, but the power comes with inherited restrictions that she cannot touch any of her clients or leave the premises of her shop. However, Tilo ultimately overcomes the haptic prohibition but retains her association with the spices of "lower senses" which, this essay argues, is how she overpowers subjugation and attains her desired identity with chosen sensory associations.

**Keywords:** Sensorial hegemony; diaspora; identity; haptic prohibition

## I. Introduction

Traditional perceptions of human sensoria often hierarchize the five senses and work as the means for political and cultural exclusion. The notion of the superiority of sight as a sense and the relegation of "other" senses, those of smell, hearing, touch, and taste, essentially lead to the excluding or othering of certain races, class, or gender. *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni incorporates a complicated domain of hegemony through the representation of an Eastern woman in America who deals in the magical, sensorial power of various spices. The novel potentially combines three commonly "othered" elements in the portrayal of the protagonist Tilottoma, or Tilo: a woman's body stripped of its desire, her Eastern origin and diasporic identity, and the so called "lower senses" her spices relate or appeal to. The touch, smell or taste of each spice she sells can do wonders such as healing people or fulfilling their various needs and desires. Tilo is an initiated clairvoyant who, nevertheless, has to obey certain rules imposed on her by her foremothers for the preservation of her power. She must stay within the boundaries of her shop and must not touch any of her clients—a code of practice that symbolizes the imposed femininity on, as well as the segregation of, a woman who is allowed to associate with only spices of "lower senses". However, Tilo's later physical intimacy with Raven, her American lover, and yet her prioritization of the spices over all else is what enables her to break free from her subjugation and choose her desired identity.

## II. The Magical and the Realist in *The Mistress of Spices*

The plot of the novel includes some magical elements inserted into everyday realistic happenings, which complicates our reading as well as offers an opportunity to read the text from multiple angles. On the one hand, the novel deals with an Eastern woman

immigrating to the West as in a typical diasporic novel and, on the other, the protagonist's mysterious journey from the past and her supernatural power over the spices give the story a touch of magical realism. However, most of the magical incidents in the novel seem to be happening in Tilo's imagination and recollections, or they seem to nicely blend into realistic possibilities. Gita Rajan views *The Mistress of Spices* as a simple story told in a complicated manner with special effects, which makes the novel's mysticism comparable to the works of Marquez, Rushdie, and Allende. However, rather than drawing the magical elements on a big canvas of realism, Divakaruni's magical realist plot operates on a small-scale "Orientalized mysticism" within which Tilo's imaginary workings lend her an apparent mystical power (Rajan 216). According to Rajan, Divakaruni represents Tilo's mystical power to challenge the imposed reality of an imperialist brand. Rajan maintains that the traditional genre of the realist novel works as an instrument of imperialism since the realism portrayed in such novels is essentially Western and requires "realist" novels from other locations to conform to the Western norms. The endorsement of the Western realist tradition as the marker of global realism, thus, imposes certain expectations on writers. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the magical elements give the realist plot a unique mould that defies the traditional idea of a realist work but, at the same time, these elements do not occlude the struggles of diasporic people in the novel. Tilo's deeply held belief in the power of spices helps some people who struggle with their marginalized existence in a cosmopolitan setting. Rajan postulates that the magical elements in the novel represent symbolic aspects of love and care of human nature that offset greater forces of hegemonic power. Such forces not only exercise power on marginalized groups but also bind women to a subservient existence of lower senses and strict patriarchal regulations.

However, if we endorse Gita Rajan's view that the plot of the novel is essentially a simple one leaning towards the realist type, it has an impact on the way we explain the sensory experiences in the novel. The sensory descriptions in the novel dwell evidently in both the magical and the realistic realms, but a lot of the sensory experiences seem flattened once we explain the allegorical aspects of the novel only as elements of the realistic struggles of a diasporic community, which includes a subjugated woman, Tilo. The more plausible sensory engagements in the book, which are not too many, are Tilo's physical relationship with Raven, and her touching, tasting and smelling of the spices in the shop before she delivers them to the customers. However, the major sensory details in the novel, such as the inexplicable power the spices exercise on people's lives, and the mysterious moments Tilo and the other women spend on the island, bear only symbolic significances. The ordinary usage of spices in culinary practices represents cultural values and practices. But the miracles done by the spices in the novel are explainable by the mere reasoning that it is only people's belief or just the passage of time, not the actual power of the spices, which eliminates the troubles from people's lives. For instance, when Tilo thinks of the best spice for Raven, she picks "*mahamul*, the root spice...to enhance fortune, to bring success or joy, to avert ill luck" (74). But, we immediately come to know that it is only the spiritual contemplation which brings out the effect of *mahamul*: "When you do not know how else to help someone, you must go deep into your being and search out the *mahamul*" (74). Again, Tilo believes that the sensory power of basil can bring different classes and cultures of people closer because the "burn[ing] of *tulsi*, basil which is the plant of humility, curber of ego", emits "sweet smoke" and can turn people's "thoughts inward, away from worldliness" (79). In other words, we can relate the effect



of basil to the idea that the acts of humility and sweetness can remove discrimination and compartmentalization from the society. The act of walking on fire on the island can symbolize both the women's process of purification and their punishment for transgression. The allegorical implications of the overall plot, therefore, flatten the sense experiences to a great extent and symbolize, or even heighten, the existential situation of the characters.

Given a range of choices we can make for our reading of this novel, the plot of Divakaruni's novel can be read as an allegory of a woman's sensorial journey through patriarchal and hierarchical order to the point of her attempt to attain autonomy. Tilo's inheritance of mysterious power allows her to travel in an old woman's body through time and arrive at her chosen place Oakland, California. From her spice shop there, she serves the needs of people by discerning the sensorial qualities of different spices and their applicability to solving the problems of people. The story, therefore, is embedded in the power of multisensorial experiences from which we can make a strong case for understanding the deeply held prejudices of associating women with some "lower" senses. Nonetheless, Tilo's later disobedience to her matriarchal order does not necessarily indicate her dissociation from the so-called "lower" senses; it rather asserts that the association of women with their priorities of senses can be a potential source of power. She shows how a woman can retain her femininity while dealing with certain senses yet can also break free from the shackles of a subjugated identity. Her union with Raven and yet her unbending ties with the spices not only promise her authenticity but also reflect that women's association with spices doesn't necessarily have to be a patriarchal imposition but can be a choice.

### III. Haptic Prohibition, Ocularcentrism, and the "witch" Identity

The association of women with certain senses which are deemed as lower is related to the historical rise of ocularcentrism, or the rise of sight as the supreme sense. In his seminal work *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting and Touching in History*, Mark M. Smith outlines the historical and political factors that have contributed to the ocularcentric practices in our society and shaped a system of power that exploits human sensorium to its advantage. The "Introduction" of Smith's book takes up the issue of the "great divide" theory that places the dominance of vision in Western thinking in contrast to the "synesthetic sensorium" of the Orient and many tribal societies in Africa (9). This sweeping binary in the historical reading of sensorium parallels Tilo's "Oriental" sensory engagements in a Western setting. Although Tilo complicates such binary by exercising her power of spices and regulating people's lives, she, nevertheless, falls victim to the same divide since she belongs to the "other" side of power. For instance, she fully identifies herself with the condition of Mohan, an Indian who leaves America after facing a racial assault that leaves him physically and mentally shattered. In her mind, she speaks to Mohan, about whom she reads only in the newspaper: "My limbs ache as after long illness, my sari is damp with silver-sweat, and in my heart I cannot tell where your pain ends and mine begins" (182). Such moments in the novel demonstrate her association with the struggling diasporic community and highlight her own existential dilemma and her "Oriental" roots.

The rise of ocularcentrism has largely shaped gender roles and social organizations to the disadvantage of women. In the chapter titled "Seeing" of his book, Mark M. Smith discusses the emergence of sight as the superior sense, an emergence that also created

unequal power relations and promoted the segregationist intents of human beings. For example, Smith refers to the Renaissance period to point out how men were meant for sight-oriented tasks, such as reading, writing, and travelling, whereas women were supposed to work in the kitchen where other senses like taste, touch and smell were more prominent. Smith therefore shows how the sense of sight worked as a tool for exclusion to preserve "relations of dominance and subordination" (2). The association of women with the so-called lower senses helped men confine women virtually in the household and exert their patriarchal control over women. Tilo's training in the island to deal with the spices exemplifies the continuation of the Renaissance intent of viewing woman from a segregationist ideology. She is expected to know every sensory detail about the spices and their usage for preparing food. In her case though, the order of the senses is partially different. She can use her sight if she stays within her shop, and she is not allowed to touch people she sells her spices to. Nevertheless, her engagement in culinary matters represents the historical subjugation of women through their association with household works such as cooking.

Tilo's magical power might give us an indication that she has the power to overcome her subjugated identity, but the bestowing of the same power on her can also be seen as the continuation of an ancient tendency to view women as social outcasts. In her essay "The Witch's Senses: Sensory Ideologies and Transgressive Femininities from the Renaissance to Modernity," Constance Classen offers a historical overview of the systematic, masculine domination of women's sensibilities, as she recounts the treatment of women and their association with senses in our society from the Renaissance to the modern times. Classen claims that, even though women have always contributed their intelligence and sensibility to civilization, they have been assigned a secondary status which dates to the Renaissance practice of associating women with witchcraft. Classen shows that witchcraft is an identity factor that has been associated with women to exoticize them and exclude them from the mainstream society. Even though the identity of a witch gives women certain powers, it, nevertheless, is a patriarchal mechanism of segregating them. The way the initial chapters of the novel represent the supernatural power of Tilo and other women on the island, followed by Tilo exercising her magical power of spices in modern America, reads like a representation of her as a witch brought back from the magical realm of the Renaissance to modern America. The Renaissance witch could use the power of odour and flames for cure, but her transgressive use of the sense of touch would turn her into a seductress and a "mistress of the sense of sight," Classen observes (76). Likewise, Tilo is allowed to use the taste and smell of the spices; her touching of any people or leaving the compound of store would be considered transgressive. Her representation is, therefore, that of a modern-day "witch." Like the Renaissance witch, she is a social outcast who can use her power to heal people but she is not allowed to set her feet out of the shop and merge with the people in Oakland.

Tilo's haptic prohibition or her spatial boundaries, or even her "witchlike" representation in the novel, evidently reflects the imposition of patriarchal expectations on women and their exclusion from the mainstream life. First of all, Tilo's earlier life on the island before she comes to Oakland symbolizes the timeless burden of Indian femininity; the island's mystical training has an influence on her life and shapes her agency. The Old One, the unnamed first woman who is all powerful, says to all mistresses that they are not as important as the spices are, which is an indication that their role is subservient to the people they serve with the spices. One frequent warning that the oldest

woman gives to Tilo and others is: "It is not allowed for Mistresses to touch those who come to us. To upset the delicate axis of giving and receiving on which our lives are held precarious" (6). They must shun their desire at any cost. The Old One also warns Tilo about her sensuousness which might transpire from "her lava hands" (51), hence the need for a haptic prohibition. The fact that the island life for Tilo has actually been a training in typical, subdued femininity becomes evident from her remembrances: "much of our time was spent in common things, sweeping and stitching and rolling wicks for lamps, gathering wild spinach and roasting *chapatis* and braiding each other's hair" (54). Also, the test of the Fire of Shampati the mistresses have to go through is another instance that demystifies the island life and reflects it as a training in "traditional femininity." In Hindu mythology Sita walked through the fire to prove her chastity to her husband. In the same fashion, the rebellious women on the island also have to walk through fire to prove their virtuousness and loyalty to their training. Tilo's coming to America promises her an escape from such practices and expectations since she wishes to come to California when they are given choices of places in which they can run their spice shops. However, despite overcoming many of the "superstitious" beliefs and breaking many of the rules, she ironically holds onto some of them till the end. One such practice is the rite of Shampati's fire, which she decides to go through when she realizes that she has broken a major commandment of her training by becoming physically close to Raven. It's only when she cannot convince the spices to set the shop ablaze, she realizes that she might not have committed any sin.

Tilo's mission of running a spice shop in California, especially following from her earlier training on the island, makes her appear like a religious ascetic aiming to achieve spiritual salvation. A very important creed of her training is to shun physical desire and to dedicate her life to the service of others. Both on the island and in Oakland, she leads an enclosed life like many women who live an isolated life in monasteries. Such monastic enclosure promises transcendence but, on the flip side, is also an attempt to separate women from the public sphere. Women are traditionally considered prone to transgressive desire so, such enclosure of them is validated by the hierarchical, regulatory mechanism of the society. The paradoxical juxtaposition of Tilo's apparent spiritual transcendence and her physical confinement, therefore, resonates women's monastic enclosure. Her engagement with the spices also reflects the sensorial, religious rituals women perform in the confines of monasteries and households. However, Tilo's spiritual ascent provides her with the strength to renegotiate her confined, "othered" identity. She has the ability to walk on the fire like the ancient and modern firewalking ascetics from Africa, India and other parts of the world who believe that fire empowers and rejuvenates them. By according her such supernatural power, Divakaruni seems to be figuratively stating that the subjugation of a woman or anyone marginalized might not just ensue from their lack of strength; the subjugation may also result from their lack of effort to break free from the psychological shackles created by oppressive forces.

#### IV. Diaspora and Desire in Oakland

One of the other hegemonic conditions that Tilo negotiates is her diasporic identity in the cosmopolitan California. Even though she stays confined within her spice shop, she shares a deep bond with the expatriate people who visit her shop. She empathizes deeply with their existential crises and tries her utmost to help them with counsels and spices. Swathi Krishna views Tilo as a character who signifies the struggles of a diasporic woman's

attempt to attain autonomy for herself and for the others of her kind. Krishna claims that Tilo's attempt to rescue individuals by the magical power of spices symbolizes her empathy to uplift individuals from the discrimination of class, race and gender and, therefore, she is represented in the novel as a partial exception to the normative diaspora characters. Krishna observes: "what she achieves in the end is what she truly desires and gains [which is] not only the autonomy from the control of the spices but also a new and independent Indian American identity" (15).

However, Tilo's allegiance to the regulations forced on her denotes the fact that she herself remains ironically mired in her duties set by a patriarchal order. She herself admits this dilemma when her struggles surface with her falling in love with the "lonely American," Raven. When she witnesses the discord between Geeta, her friend, and Geeta's parents and grandfather over her intent to marry a Chicano American, she sympathizes with all of them but aligns herself more with Geeta because of her own desire for her "lonely American." In her mind she says, "Geeta, like you I too am learning how love like a rope of ground glass can snake around your heart and pull you, bleeding, away from all you should", as she admits that Geeta's case essentially reminds her of her Americanness, therefore, her own precariousness (95). Tilo, thus, struggles to renegotiate her identity of a "third world" diasporic woman since her magical power keeps her in the confines of her imposed identity. Krishna sums up this tension in Tilo's diasporic existence in the following lines:

Notably, while Tilo upholds the mystical powers and tradition of India that in turn grant her supernatural abilities as a healer and a nurturer, ironically, it is these powers that entrap her under stringent gender norms emanating from traditional Indian value-systems. Likewise, while America bestows upon her the independence and autonomy to run a spice shop, it nevertheless exoticizes her. Tilo, the magical healer, therefore, inhabits a liminal space between the east and the west where she constantly negotiates with cultural codes in order to attain autonomy and identity. (8)

The words uttered by Ahuja's wife, another of Tilo's customers, also mirror Tilo's liminality since both of them are trying to escape the same dictates of a patriarchal order. Just the way Tilo expressed her desire for freedom by opting to come to America, Ahuja's wife also thought America could be the place for the fulfilment of her freedom from womanly expectations. However, though these women have physically escaped their original locations of oppression, the ghost of patriarchy haunts their unconscious, given the long standing, systematic oppression that still binds them to certain feminine duties. Ahuja's wife says: "Here in America may be we could start again, away from those eyes, those mouths always telling us how a man should act, what is a woman's duty. But ah the voices, we carried them all the way inside our heads" (107). These voices are symbolic of the language of domination which is used for "disciplining" women. Ahuja's wife and Tilo, representatives of women who have escaped their original country and their original locale of gender discrimination, are still controlled by those voices. The cautionary words of the Old One that Tilo often recalls throughout the novel are also like these voices in her unconscious that force her to curb her desire and other expectations.

The liminal space between the east and the west that Tilo inhabits is powerfully and symbolically represented by Divakaruni through Tilo's spatial isolation within her shop. Though Tilo has arrived at the western setting of Oakland, she is symbolically trapped within the magical world of smell and taste of the spices in her shop from which she cannot step outside. The representation of her shop, Spice Bazaar, sounds like a typical

upscale Indian spice shop located in the middle of, yet tucked away from, the happenings of the cosmopolitan Oakland. The tendency to equate Indianness with strong spices has been a historical trope of Indian femininity. Paroma Roy's book *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial* studies the effects of culinary issues on human lives and identity. She captures a range of political, historical and thematic ideas that concern the Indian subject's identity in relation to the culinary history from the colonial to the postcolonial period. Roy's discussion in her book about Madhur Jaffrey's writings and about Sara Suleri's book *Meatless Days* tells us how ideas of food play a role in shaping the Indian identity in cosmopolitan and transnational settings—an idea that extends to Tilo's negotiation of her diasporic identity in the cosmopolitan setting. Tilo's customers are mostly Indians, and we can say that even within the cosmopolitan buzz of Oakland, she is inhabiting a little India in which the cooking spices greatly dictate her identity formation. In "Appetites: Spices Redux," the fourth chapter of her book, Roy refers to Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* as a work in which "spices have served as a favored trope of cultural representation" (156). She observes that Divakaruni trades "overtly in the exotic aura of spices" and essentially "deploy[s] spices to a number of parabolic ends, to signify, variously, magic, enchantment, healing, and the cultural sedimentations of diaspora" (157). Accordingly, Roy concludes that Divakaruni's use of spices mainly serves "a linguistic and ideological" purpose to offer a gastronomic angle to the cultural representation of a diasporic community (157). In other words, Roy claims that Divakaruni's treatment of the spices makes the sensory appeals secondary to the meanings the spices render or symbolize. The spices symbolize the Indianness that marks the "otherness" and the restrictions associated with Tilo's evolving identity.

The novel's setting in Oakland resonates the history of migration into America of many Asian and African communities and, so, magnifies Tilo's status as a diasporic character. Located across the bay from the more affluent and cosmopolitan San Francisco, Oakland accommodated mainly an African American community in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and, therefore, has its own history of marginality. The different communities in Oakland mostly maintained their differences from each other, and food was an essential trope to understand their intermingling as well as detachment. In her essay "Race in the study of food," Rachel Slocum discusses culinary cultures, especially those the migrant communities reflect, as indicative of racial identity and politics. She claims that the production and consumption of food is "central to the development and preservation of racialized identity and belonging for women, diasporic populations, immigrants and the displaced, enslaved and impoverished" (305). She mentions the African American "soul food" as an example of how a certain type of food that reflects racial identity can, at the same time, evoke pride and dislike based on its coexistence and history in relation to other culinary cultures. In comparison to vegetarian diets preferred mostly by the whites, soul food was considered unhealthy and, thus, reflected the association of "junk food" with racial identity. However, Slocum highlights the fact that, now, "embracing soul food is a statement of racial pride precisely because it reclaims foods previously despised" (306).

Being part of a similar culinary scene of diverse cultures, Tilo's spice shop represents both her separation from, as well as connection with, other communities. However, her interactions with other communities are restricted to only a few individuals like Raven. So, the assemblage of her spices and their sensory applications mainly signify Tilo's isolation from the scene of cultural exchange as much as they denote the compart-

mentalization of cultures and classes in Oakland. Divakaruni interestingly shows how people's preferences for different sensory appeals of different spices separate their classes as well. The rich Indian class prefers Basmati rice for its sweetness, mustard oil for the look that comes via an expensive bottle, and the very expensive box of saffron which is "like shavings of flame" (78). There are other rich Indians who are so isolated from the community that they just send their attendants instead to buy spices for them. Culinary practices, along with the associated sensory experiences, thus unpack some cultural and class elements of diasporic identity.

### V. Power, Commerce, and Tilo's Haptic Prohibition

The historical understanding of Indianness via spices has its own power dynamics which can, in turn, echo the power structure that subjugates Tilo. Andrew Dalby's book *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* studies the history of spice trade and the historical determinants associated with power and capital behind the transcultural movement of spices in general. Dalby concentrates on the origins and historical passages of cloves, nutmeg, ginger, pepper, chili, coriander, and cumin which represent various causes and dynamics of movement that embody human desire, belief, exchanges and longing for tastes—observations that parallel Tilo's adoption of the power and sensory appeals of most of the same spices. Above all, spice trade gave rise to routes that connected the different parts of the world, which was a development towards acculturation and globalization. The sensory representation of spices, both in Dalby's book and in *The Mistress of Spices*, establishes a connection between the movement of people and spices, and certain power dynamics. The old-day imperial trades have now been replaced by the modern-day globalization in which Tilo's shop captures the implications of a similar power dynamics. In the cosmopolitan, free setting of Oakland, Tilo's oriental, feminine identity cannot transgress the boundaries of "lower senses" and their playfield within her shop. She can exercise her "supernatural" power about the spices through mainly the senses of smell and taste, and only within the boundaries of her shop.

The legacies of patriarchy and the dynamics of the capitalistic market reduce Tilo's role to mere exchange value, symbolically expressed in her prohibition against touching people or leaving her shop. Luce Irigaray observes that women's position in the society is determined merely by their exchange value: "all the systems of exchange that organize patriarchal societies and all the modalities of productive work that are organized, valued, and rewarded in these societies are men's business...wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men" (800). Although we do not quite see Tilo being directly exchanged via her relations with men, she has to go through a patriarchal order of exchange: from her past training in being a "pure" woman who cannot desire men, to the present suppression of her desire for a man from another culture.

Tilo's life hanging between her desire and duty becomes a battle of the senses for her. This is a battle between her expected engagement in the dealing of smell and taste of spices, and her transgressive desire to upset the haptic prohibition imposed on her. This dilemma marks an important point of transition from her enforced identity to attaining her desired agency by getting physically close to Raven, an American man who one day walks into her shop and immediately attracts her. The description of a typical day inside her shop gives us an impression that Raven is penetrating her protected sensory world: "At the store each day has a color, a smell. And if you know to listen, a melody" (69). Her

increasing desire for Raven alarms her about an impending disaster, in the form of “the first tremor” of earthquakes (77). The transition from her expected virtuous image to that of a rebel is not an easy one, so she remains perplexed and indecisive for a while. But ultimately, she opts for what the Old One has described as “life-lust, that craving to taste all things, sweet as well as bitter, on your own tongue” (86). Also, Tilo interestingly projects her complex sensory experience and desire—the Old One terms it as “life-lust”—into an understanding of the migrant’s postcolonial desire for the cosmopolitan center. Tilo perceives that the immigrants in America have a dilemma in their postcolonial “longing for the ways they chose to leave behind when they chose America” (5). She describes that dilemma in terms of a sensory experience, comparable to the “bitter-sweet aftertaste in the mouth when one has chewed *amlaki* to freshen the breath” (5).

Tilo’s transgressions, both in terms of sensory and identity issues, happen in the form of her desiring Raven to the extent that she starts to neglect her training in dealing with the spices. Her attempt to escape from the shop affects her association with the spices and their sensory power. Spices stop listening to her commands; the rising smell of burning poppy seeds behaves unusually, making her “cough till tears come” (135). In the back of her mind she hears the warning of the Old One, the incarnation of all feminine values: “Don’t let America seduce you into calamities you cannot imagine. Dreaming of love, don’t rouse the spices’ hate” (148). This warning portrays a sign of dissociation from her age-old, feminine engagement with spices, and it cautions that her femininity will be threatened if she behaves like a transgressor. For a moment she steps back, taking an oath to not falter in her purpose of serving the spices and the people who have been crushed in their pursuit of the American dream. But, her worries about the possibility of seeing Raven with another woman breaks her resolve. She uses the flavors and smells of some spices for preparing a bath to tempt Raven with, and starts to spend time with him outside her shop, promising to her spices that she will be dutiful soon. However, her struggles intensify. At one point, the people who were benefitted from her spices in the past begin to experience strange results from the spices or even face accidents. Also, an earthquake damages her shop. She takes all these as a collective sign of disaster resulting from her disobedience.

## VI. Conclusion

The closure in the plot of the novel, however, provides an essential turn in favour of the discussion of Tilo’s struggle as her diasporic reconciliation. In the end, Tilo and Raven unite, and they agree that their “earthly paradise” is no utopia but it is what they can construct in the debris left by the earthquake, “in the soot in the rubble in the crisped-away flesh...in the hate in the fear” (336). As they walk towards the fire and the debris of the city left by the earthquake, Tilo still hears echoes from her past life. She is still unclear if she is advancing towards her desired identity, wondering if Raven just desires her for her “Oriental” exotica which might not bring any significant change to her agency. But there are signs which Tilo interprets as true love and her dignity: Raven’s house has secret touches of things that Tilo preferred; she is unsuccessful to initiate the rite of fire to punish her for her assumed transgression; and she realizes that the spices listen to her again and have not deserted her even after her physical relationship with Raven. This bridging of the best from the two worlds—the love for spices she inherits from the past and her love for Raven which she has now learnt to desire— indicates the possibility of a

revised, autonomous identity for her. We hardly miss the tone of conviction with which she approaches this new turn in her life: "I acted out of love, in which is no sinning" (318).

Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, therefore, portrays the body of an "Oriental" woman as a site of oppression bearing multiple markers of hegemonic practices of power that she optimistically tries to thwart. The text also allows us to see Tilo's transgression as her overturning of the popular ideas of the witch identity in which the "magical" power of femininity is expected to operate under certain rules. She, in a complex way, disregards the oppressive aspects of the rules but chooses to live with the sensory wonders of her spices. Her spice shop becomes a utopia for the ideal world of senses where spices of all kinds of colors, tastes, smells, feels, and melodies represent what Tilo desires the world to be like: a safe place for people of all races, cultures, colors, genders, and preferences. At the same time, she preserves her power over spices and rejects the haptic prohibition on her femininity. She ultimately emerges as a true "mistress of spices" because she retains her own version of femininity yet challenges the masculine, imperial gaze of power.

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# Labour and Migrant Labour in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

RITA JOSHI

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**Abstract:** The fiction of Amitav Ghosh has frequently portrayed labourers. Migrant labour has been his special concern. His fiction is concerned with migration and travel as a basic feature of human experience especially in the colonial era. *Sea of Poppies* portrays the fate both of the labourers who work in opium fields and the inhuman condition of the Ghazipur opium factory and that of illegal migrant labour aboard the trading vessel, *Ibis*, and the inhuman treatment they have to put up with. Thus Ghosh severely indicts perpetrators of the opium trade in the colonial era.

**Keywords:** Opium, migrant, factory, ship, trader

The fiction of Amitav Ghosh is marked by travel; diaspora and illegal migrant labour both figure in his fiction. Travel is easily possible for those who have passports. Those who lack passports travel covertly. Amitav Ghosh's fiction shows concern and empathy with the working class in general and migrant labour in particular. *Sea of Poppies* (2008) recreates the nineteenth century era of the opium trade and portrays labourers in the village who work on poppy fields and suffer at the hands of their colonial employers; they run away to sea to become migrant labour in countries like Mauritius and undergo horrendous journeys on the ships. Ghosh critiques an era when migrant labour became very prominent and the colonial masters sent massive numbers of men and women from India to other countries for the purpose of enhancing trade. The continuing movement of migrant labour in the world today can be seen as a hangover from colonial precedents.

In *The Circle of Reason* (1986), his first novel and *Gun Island* (2019), his latest novel, Ghosh depicts the movement of migrant labour from India to Al Ghazira and Italy respectively. In the first novel, "the faceless migrants ...have no privileged relationship with their 'New World.'...multinational corporations are responsible for their exploitation....third world migrants in the Gulf are marginalized" (Chambers 58). In *Gun Island* a number of illegal immigrants from West Bengal and Bangladesh make their way to Italy: "When Deen travels to Venice ... he discovers that many Bangladeshis are being employed as illegal migrant labour. Their hazardous journey across the Middle East and Africa and the strong, even militant, opposition to their presence by Italian authorities" is described (Joshi 98). However, in these two novels, the concern with migrant labour is a subsidiary concern while it is the primary concern in *Sea of Poppies*.

The opium trade by the British carrying opium from India to China is the central concern of the novel. Mr. Burnham tells Neel, the Raja of Raskhali, that "British rule in India could not be sustained without opium.... The Company's annual gains from opium are almost equal to the entire revenue ... of the United States. Do you imagine that British

rule would be possible in this impoverished land if it were not for this source of wealth? And if we reflect on the benefits that British rule has conferred upon India, does it not follow that opium is this land's greatest blessing" (115).

Elsewhere in the novel, the British enterprise of growing opium is justified. Mr. Burnham states that the ill effects of opium in China are not worse than the effects of gin in London. One cannot ban liquor, it is the small man's daily pleasure; similarly one cannot ban opium. Opium's medicinal by-products, Burnham points out, include morphine, codeine, nicotine — "those are but a few of the blessings derived from opium" (116). The Chinese authorities are opposing the opium trade as they are not getting an adequate cut from the profits. So a war becomes necessary to bring China to its heels. As usual any colonial effort is presented as having a philanthropic motivation: "a war is necessary if China is to be opened to God's word." Burnham says the reason for the Opium War becomes a missionary effort to save Chinamen. Also the war will help the Indians more than anyone else: "We need only think of the poor Indian peasant—what will become of him if his opium can't be sold in China?" (260).

The novel opens with the involvement of poor farmers in growing poppies at the behest of the East India Company to feed the Sudder Opium factory in Ghazipur. We are given a detailed fictional depiction of the experience of labour in the poppy fields. Deeti, a central character in the novel, sweeps up poppy leaves and heats them on an iron plate on her small domestic fire. They soon melt and form "rotis" like pieces of bread. These rotis are sold to the Sudder Opium factory to line the earthenware containers in which opium is stored.

In the old days the villagers would grow a little poppy and sell some and keep some. Poppies were grown in small quantities between clusters of wheat, masoor dal and vegetables. The sap was sieved of impurities and left to dry and became "akbari" afeem. Some opium was kept for illnesses and domestic cooking. The rest was sold to local nobility. A few clumps of poppies were adequate to grow. The actual growing of poppy was difficult and we see how on insisting on using their fields entirely for the growth of the crop of poppy, the British imposed a very unfair demand on the poor farmer.

The growing of poppy required fifteen ploughings of land; fences had to be built, manure procured and there had to be constant watering of the crop. No one wanted to plant more than a small amount of poppies—wheat, dal, vegetables were far more profitable to grow. But "the factory's appetite for opium seemed never to be sated" (29). The agents would go from house to house forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign contracts. At the end the earnings of the farmers just paid off the advance. The opium growing farmers were reduced to extreme poverty forcing them to run away and explore other options like becoming migrant labour sailing international waters from Calcutta.

The farmers are very badly treated not only by the British agents but also the local nobility. An example is Kahua, a very tall, strong man. He is hired by a family of three noblemen to fight and win wrestling matches for them and he earns them vast sums of money. Then they have a lewd desire to watch him in a sexual encounter with a prostitute. She refuses. He is forced to perform a sexual act with a mare and is led back to the village, utterly humiliated, led by a halter.

There are two important spaces in the novel pertaining to labour and migrant labour—the Sudder Opium factory, and later the ship, *Ibis*, which carries migrant labour to other ports in Mauritius. Both spaces indicate the colonial attitude to the poor, destitute labour class, used as a mere tool in trade and not seen or treated as human at all.

The British flag flies on top of the Sudder Opium factory. The factory looks like a medieval fort. Armed guards and sentries pace the factory keeping a close watch on the workers. The factory has a lazy atmosphere. The monkeys on the trees are stupefied by the fumes of the factory. Inside the factory the odour of raw opium sap befuddles the senses of those who work inside. The raw opium gum is stored in earthenware vessels.

Ghosh's vivid imagining of the interior of the nineteenth-century factory helps us to realize the actual, horrendous circumstances in which the workers functioned. The factory itself is like a tunnel. The air inside is hot and smells of liquid opium mixed with the stench of sweat. Deeti sees a number of dark, lifeless torsos. These are bare-bodied men sunk waist deep in the opium and have glazed eyes. We can see how dangerous the work is. These men have "the look of ghouls" (95). The white overseers are armed with fearsome instruments: metal scoops, long rods.

On the upper scaffolds are boys who throw the spheres of opium to each other, relaying them from hand to hand until they come to rest on the floor. The slightest slip from that height can mean death. If one of them drops a sphere he is thrashed with a cane, "his howls and shrieks went echoing through the vast chilly chamber" (96). The overcrowded factory employs two hundred and fifty adult men and five hundred boys.

The Ibis carries a motley crowd of people including migrant labour. It is headed for Mauritius. In Amitav Ghosh's work bodies of water like rivers and seas figure prominently. In *The Circle of Reason* the Mariana, a small ship, takes a group of migrant labour to the Arab kingdom of Al Ghazira. The boats in Ghosh's work are an ironic version of the Biblical Noah's ark. In a way the ships have a salvational role because they help the migrant workers to escape to newer places with hope of profit and better life circumstances. But the conditions on the ships, including those of the Ibis, are deplorable and inhuman.

The Ibis was "'Blackbirder' for transporting slaves." The reason she changed hands was that slavery was being abolished in America. The new owner "had acquired her with an eye to fitting her for a different trade: the export of opium" (11). As such she was acquired by Burnham Bros., based in Calcutta, having extensive interests in India and China.

Again, with the failure of the opium trade and in the wake of the looming first Opium War with China, the ship was put to a new use of exporting coolies from India to Mauritius. When the ship reaches Port Louis, the owner of the plantation requests the foreman, Zachary Reid, to bring coolies: "tell Mr. Burnham that I need men. Now that we no longer have slaves in Mauritius, I must have coolies, or I am doomed" (21).

The description of the housing quarters of the ship for slaves and coolies is frightening. The area is divided into pens as is done for animals. There are chains nailed onto a beam ending in a clasp for a human hand reminding us of the time the Ibis was used to transport slaves.

There are depressions on the wooden floor which could only have been made by humans: "packed close together, like merchandise on a vendor's counter". (143). Earlier Zachary discovers that the middle deck, "where the schooner's human cargo had been accommodated, was riddled with peepholes and air ducts, bored by generations of captive Africans" (12).

The kinds of people who manage the Ibis trace the hierarchy of persons the British used to control the migrant labour. These persons are opportunists who have moved up the scale from the lowest rungs and are quite happy to cruelly enforce the demands of their employers on the workers. The second in command is a coloured man, Zachary Reid. He was born to a quadroon mother and a white father. To escape racism he runs away and joins the Ibis on its first voyage from Baltimore to Calcutta.

The owner of the *Ibis* is Benjamin Burnham whose first voyage was to the prison island, Port Blair. Here he acquires education and befriends the prison chaplain. He finds employment with various firms dealing with the China trade. In 1817 he becomes a free merchant for the East India Company and starts exporting opium to China. His first foray into trade, though, is transporting men, convicts. He makes a huge profit and can enter the opium trade. He is smug that the slave trade has been replaced with the opium trade: "when the doors of freedom were shut to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet more needful of it—the Asiatic" (79).

Serang Ali, of uncertain origins, is the chief of lascars or deck hands, themselves a form of migrant labour. Nob Kissin who comes from a religious family from a village near Calcutta becomes a "gomuster", an agent of the East India Company, to sign bonds with weavers and artisans to deliver goods to the Company at fixed prices. These agents were ruthless and punished artisans for delays. Nob Kissin is a typical employee of the Company—domineering and cruel to the poor labour class and obsequious to the white employer: "He never took offence if a sahib called him a dung-brained gubberhead, or compared his face to a bandar's bung-hole" (163). The language of the white man shows that they look on the Asian labour force as little better than animals.

The migrants aboard the *Ibis* consist of "girmitiyas" or indentured labour and lascars who are deck hands: "Shiploads of coolies travelled the Indian Ocean under horrible conditions ... to supply cheap labour for the British sugar planters in such islands as Mauritius" (329). As Deeti goes to pick up her husband from the opium factory, she sees hundreds of people walking past with bundles on their heads. They are hemmed in by stick-bearing guards. Deeti is told they are girmitiyas:

They were so called because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on 'girmits' — agreements written on pieces of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished as if into the netherworld" (72).

Deeti is told they are going to "Mareech ... an island in the sea—like Lanka, but further away" (72).

Later, when Deeti cannot repay the advance taken by her husband for the poppy planting she is rudely told to sell her sons as girmitiyas: "Do what others are doing ... Sell your sons. Send them off to Mauritius" (155).

The recruiter (daffadar) of girmitiyas for the *Ibis*, Ramsaran, approaches Nob Kissin to create a camp to house the girmitiyas till they board the ship. The aim is commercial not philanthropic:

In the past, duffadars like Ramsaran had usually kept their recruits in their own homes until they were shipped out. But this practice had proved unsatisfactory ... for one, it plunged the would-be migrants into city life, exposing them to all kinds of rumours and temptations.... A few duffadars had tried to keep their recruits indoors by locking them out—but only to be faced with riots, fires and break-outs. The city's unhealthy climate was yet another problem, for every year a good number of migrants perished of communicable diseases. From an investor's point of view, each dead, escaped, incapacitated recruit represented a serious loss and it was increasingly clear that if something wasn't done about the problem the business would cease to be profitable... a camp had to be built" (197).

Nob Kissin, the overseer of the *Ibis*, knows that Burnham will not be in favour of wasting money on building a camp: "Burnham considered the transportation of migrants an

unimportant and somewhat annoying part of his shipping enterprise (213). However, following the fall in the opium trade, it was the coolies who have been an unfortunate alternative to the more profitable cargo of opium.

The girmitiyas are recruited across caste: "All kinds of men are eager to sign in—Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamars, Telis. What matters is that they are young and able-bodied and willing to work" (204-5). The duffadar tells Kahua he is willing to take women like Deeti as people in Mareech want female recruits. Women were cheaper to hire than men: "Women have always represented a significant share of migratory movements" (Eagle, 1)

At a slightly higher level than girmitiyas are the lascars who work as deck hands on the ship. However, they are treated as badly. On his first voyage on the *Ibis* Zachary has a mutiny on hand: "with the crew on half-rations, eating maggoty hard tuck and rotten beef, there was an outbreak of dysentery ... two of the black crewmen were in chains for refusing the food that was put before them" (12-13).

Zachary had thought that lascars were a tribe like Cherokee Indians. Ghosh presents an interesting sociological portrayal of lascars. They include Chinese, East Africans, Goans, Tamils and Arhanese. They come in groups of about fifteen, each with a leader, who speaks on behalf of the group. To break up the group is impossible—they have to be taken together or not at all. Though they come cheap they have their own idea of how much work they would do. Three or four lascars usually have to be employed to do one man's job" (13).

A central female character in the novel is Deeti, who escapes from Ghazipur to Calcutta. She is widowed and has to perform *sati*—that is, she has to be burnt on her husband's funeral pyre as per custom. She escapes this fate. Her journey up the river on a smaller boat with other migrants is described. This is her first travel on a smaller ship before she boards the *Ibis*. Deeti is marked by her defiance—she plans her escape: "Both Deeti and Kahua knew that their best chance of escape lay in travelling down river ... to Patna, perhaps or even Calcutta" (191).

Aboard the boat Deeti takes the other women under her fold. Ghosh gives us details of a few of the women bringing alive a few members of a faceless majority of female labour. There is Sarju, a midwife, who made a mistake while delivering a noblewoman's baby, causing her to be driven from her house. Ratna and Champa are sisters, married to two brothers whose lands were contracted to the opium factory and could no longer support them. Hence becoming indentured labourers was a better option to them than starvation. Dookhanee has escaped the oppression of living with a violently abusive mother-in-law; Muniya states she is travelling to join her two brothers who are already in Mareech. The description of these women shows the kind of women who were recruited as female migrant labour. Deeti appoints herself "a guardian of the single women" (378). The sisterhood of the women sustains them on their journey.

*Sea of Poppies* is an effective portrayal of the life of indentured labour and their plight in their homeland as planters of poppies and aboard the ship as they are carried to new destinations. The merciless nature of the white employer and his inhuman treatment of the workers are vividly conveyed bringing alive for us the life and times of poppy farmers in an era gone by.

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# Matwaala: Birth of a South Asian Diaspora Poetry Festival and Collective

USHA AKELLA

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**Abstract:** This paper will convey the reason for the launch of the first South Asian Diaspora Festival, *Matwaala* via the keynote delivered at the TLAN: Transformative Language Arts Network conference, Scottsdale, Arizona in October 2019. *Matwaala's* mission is to increase the visibility of South Asian diaspora poets in the USA. Launched in 2015, the inaugural festival was hosted in Austin followed by yearly festivals in New York/Long Island as geographically the area is a hub of numerous colleges and universities. Co-directed by US-based poets Usha Akella and Pramila Venkateswaran, the festival follows a satellite model of readings on the campuses of academic institutions with the intended directive to expose faculty and students to South Asian literature.

Since 2015, *Matwaala* has executed projects and initiatives: yearly festivals; in 2020, *Matwaala* facilitated a poetry wall—24 poems by 24 South Asian poets for the Smithsonian Exhibit *Beyond Bollywood* at the Irving Arts Center and Museum in Irving, Dallas in collaboration with Think India Foundation<sup>1</sup>; poetry readings by South Asian poets in collaboration with *India Currents*; 2019 festival of five women poets hosted by Stony Brook University and *Matwaala* 2021 will feature four readings by poets of color in four categories: African American, Native American, South/Central American and Mexican.

Thank you, organizers, colleagues, and audience, for this opportunity to share a mission very dear to my heart. Early on, I risked redefining success without being conscious of it being a risk. It was not enough for me to succeed alone—one's sense of wellbeing is tied to others. This notion stemmed from the community-based society I grew up in in India. So, my work as a poet has always had a component of activism and group welfare to it. I had launched a project with community as a baseline prior to *Matwaala* called the *Poetry Caravan* in the White Plains, New York area and for a shorter duration in Austin. Over a thousand free readings have reached disadvantaged audiences in women's shelters, senior homes and hospitals via this project. The mayor of Austin proclaimed January 7th as Poetry Caravan Day in 2016.

I migrated to the US in 1993 and have been engaged with poetry formally since 1996. I am not sure how and when the idea of the festival crystallized but it grew out of a growing sense of unease. When I talked to poet friends, it seemed to most of us that the poetry industry was a gated community and we didn't have the gate code to enter. Almost all had a story of exclusion. If one had gained entry there were invisible barricades to progress beyond a point. It could never be proved but only experienced. Pramila Venkateswaran, a Long Island poet who had served as poet-laureate of Suffolk county, especially shared my concerns. We'd often talk about the need to harness South Asian poets as a group in the mainstream arena of American literature. We just didn't feel the representation is fair enough. And we strongly felt that consolidation was necessary to make worthwhile strides as legitimate American poets.

So, in 2015, over an animated phone conversation with her, I simply said, "Let's do it." I opened our home in Austin to host the first set of poets who were featured at the festival and we were beautifully supported by the community and mainstream institutions. The word *Matwaala* means *intoxicated* and we were baptized by Dr. Amritjit Singh, a senior diaspora scholar. The name *Matwaala* evokes bonding and bonhomie, fun and funk, creative adventure and freedom, artistic assertiveness and non-conformity. A Hindi/Urdu word, it was the name of a radical literary magazine edited by the Hindi poet Nirala from Kolkata a century ago. *Matwaala* is used for someone who is drunk, but the word is used more often in a transferred sense, for someone who is a free spirit. What was significant about the first festival was that it became permission of a kind. It solidified our initial enthusiasm into a belief for its existence. It also spurred the mission of making visible narratives that are silent in history such as Phinder Dulai, an Indo-Canadian poet's moving poetry read with a historical archive of photos of the horrific Komagatu Maru incident.

Since then, we host the festival out of NYC thanks to the selfless work and support from Pramila Venkateswaran. The shift geographically was made in recognition of the centrality of New York in the country as a educational, publishing and literary hub. We are co-directors leading the mission with passion and no economic remuneration.

To understand the birth of *Matwaala* I feel we must step back in time with poetic license to understand at least nominally, the relation of the English language and Indian English poetry to the Diaspora poet.

Imagine for a moment, you are marching in relentless heat under a blazing sun, one in a throng of patriots. You are in a province of one of the conglomerations of princely states in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that became a cohesive India in 1947. Spurred by nationalistic fervor, you are dressed in *khadi*, the indigenous coarse home-spun cotton, emblematic of the satyagrahis, the non-violent freedom fighters spurred by truth-force. Your feet are shod in the simplest of footwear, the sun is upon your skin and scalp, you are marching on, your heart alive bound shoulder to shoulder. You know your life might end in a lathi charge, a beating by wooden batons from the police force of the colonial rule. But you are willing to sacrifice your life to set your country free. Your soul quivers with the anticipation of freedom, *Vande Mataram! Vande Mataram! I praise thee mother*, daring to hope for the rise of a flag in saffron, green and white. You dare to rise and join your soul-force to a unique revolution not spurred by violence but by a formula the world has never witnessed- peaceful resistance. Gandhi has stirred you with his unique methods to bring freedom to the country. And from the flaming hearts around you, in that procession and elsewhere, songs and poems pour out in every Indian regional language- Telugu, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Punjabi—and, English.

The very first poems in English in India were poems of resistance, social reformation, national celebration, cultural rediscovery and cultural assertion. Paradoxically, the English language, the colonizer's language became the great tool to resist colonialism. And continues to be a language of resistance for the diaspora poet even today. During the fight for independence, the resistance movement found a new language to link the vast breadth of the land. To be expected, the first poetry practitioners such as Sarojini Naidu, based their poems on Western models and used English forms and prosody to express anthems of resistance and national pride.

### Nightfall in the City of Hyderabad<sup>2</sup>

SEE how the speckled sky burns like a pigeon's throat,  
Jewelled with embers of opal and peridot.



See the white river that flashes and scintillates,  
Curved like a tusk from the mouth of the city-gates.

Hark, from the minaret, how the muezzin's call  
Floats like a battle-flag over the city wall.

From trellised balconies, languid and luminous  
Faces gleam, veiled in a splendour voluminous.

Leisurely elephants wind through the winding lanes,  
Swinging their silver bells hung from their silver chains.

Round the high Char Minar sounds of gay cavalcades  
Blend with the music of cymbals and serenades.

Over the city bridge Night comes majestic,  
Borne like a queen to a sumptuous festival.

Two hundred years of colonial rule, that brought a Western education via English to India, also awakened a national awareness and till date has not fully eradicated a long stream of an ancient consciousness and sensibility. The English language in its incredible elasticity was absorbed into the country post-independence with the honorific 'link language' status. Since then, the English language has coursed through the country acquiring local flavors of its terrain. There is a long line of language politics in academia regarding English and the post-colonial writer. We do not have the time to go into that history but it is sufficient to be aware that English is a complex issue in relation to regional languages and the writer writing in English is not regarded as wholly authentic. Of course, those of us writing in English resist the viewpoint. I believe English merits status as 'Indian' in the land teeming with languages and dialects.

Many Indian Englishes in rainbow hues light the country with aplomb far from the Queens English. We find the language most morphed, "biryani-fied" and chutney-fied in prose. Here is a ravishingly humorous sample from Anurag Mathur's novel *The Inscrutable Americans* published in 1991 typifying Indian English and the literary prowess of the authors using the language. The protagonist, a student on his way to America from North India, writes a letter to his younger brother:

Beloved younger brother: Greetings to respectful parents. I am hoping all is well with health and wealth. I am fine at my end. Hoping your end is fine too...Kindly assure Mother that I am strictly consuming vegetarian food only in restaurants though I am not knowing if cooks are Brahmins. I am also constantly remembering Dr. Verma's advice and strictly avoiding American women and other unhealthy habits... Younger brother I am having so many things to tell you I am not knowing where to start. Most surprising things about America is it is full of Americans, big and white, it is little frightening... I am having good time drinking 37 glasses of Coca-Cola... I am also asking her for more coca cola but she is looking like she is weeping and walking away. I think perhaps she is not understanding proper English.<sup>3</sup>

Indian English poetry came of age with Indian literary modernism evolving from the 50s with harbinger-poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, Dilip Chitre, Arun Kolatkar, Jayanta Mohapatra, Keki Daruwalla, A.K. Ramanujam and others. It bloomed in the 60s and 70s with the Mumbai poets. Those were heady years, this new poetry was finding support in mainstream magazines and newspapers, literary journals, anthologies and from poetry publishers. There's a wonderful article by Saleem Peeradina about the era on our festival page.

Compare the evolution of language and spirit in this paean to his city by Peeradina in comparison to Naidu's Hyderabad poem:

**Bandra** (An excerpt)

I love the environs  
     of your body  
 and its many insights. I recognize  
 every gesture, act, every foul thought  
     though I'll never understand  
 your central purpose. I do not wish to.  
 To grasp you is to cease to need you. It is  
 your incompleteness, inconstancy  
     attaches me to you.

You were once a sea-front town  
 that came up the thoroughfare  
 to the railway station. And passed beyond  
     its toy towers  
 to colonies that grew on your hands like sixth-fingers.

Turned around and ran  
 into a settlement  
 of shops, cafes, cinemas, churches,  
 hospitals, schools, parks.

Your mud is versatile.<sup>4</sup>

Notice how modern poetic conventions are in play: free verse, enjambment, and unseemly metaphors, from a voice in direct address to a city; it is a voice of witness capturing naked observations without the lilting romanticism of Naidu's work. Peeradina immigrated to Michigan to teach at Sienna Heights University; academics is often a trajectory chosen by many diaspora academician-poets like Ramanujam, Meena Alexander, Ralph Nazareth, Kazim Ali and Pramila Venkateswaran. Peeradina went on to be nominated as our poet-of-honor in 2017. I think I can safely state that the diasporic voice overall is reflective of the modern and postmodern voice in Western models redrafted in the complexity of immigration and complex cultural sensibilities.

The post-independence era witnessed a paradoxical phase in contrast to its historical engagement of booting out colonial rule—the wave of migrants out of the country in the fifties to the land of the colonizer and “first world.” Again, we do not have the liberty of scanning the history of migration except to say that today it is estimated that half-a-million Indians live in London alone. And about 4 million in the USA. The stream of Indian English did a roundabout and returned to its source via immigration. Which updates our story to the present.

The post-colonial space now becomes complexly redefined for the diaspora writer who has resettled himself /herself outside the home country in the land of the colonizer or white man. Added to post modernist themes of anxiety, fragmentation, identity politics, dislocation, redefining of family system and women's predicament and gender issues—exile and migration become the searing backstory to diaspora poetry. Attempting to define the self within multiple identities and cross-cultural realities is the dominant anthem. Diaspora poetry too delivers what those first English poems were doing in India—highlighting cultural rediscovery, identity and cultural reassertion but in the context of immigration. We will have a chance to sample poems at the end of the keynote.

Thematically, the sky's the limit thematically for the South Asian diaspora poet—and it is a wide sky spanning continents. The diaspora poet dares to claim the entire world as her canvas softening borders for, she is a borderless being. She leaps across the Atlantic and back merging worlds and creating new ones. She leaves her footsteps across histories and geographical spaces. A pliable soul, the ability for multiple identities, citizenships, informs her writing. For some poets, the era of unease is past and a fruitful season of integration and even bold claim emerges. Migration is perceived as a land of rich manure where much can bear fruit and multiply with endless possibilities in the creative zone. She strives to discover her own humanity in her kinship with all poets and is a cosmopolitan poet wearing layers of skin as Meena Alexander writes:

### **Cosmopolitan**

You want a poem on being cosmopolitan.  
 Dear friend, what can I say?  
 ...  
 Odd questions massed in me.  
 Who knows my name or where my skin was torn?  
 If I could would I return to Kashi?  
 And might the queen of trumps intercede for me?<sup>5</sup>

Diaspora poets write in free-verse and forms both Eastern, European and Far East, and experiment wildly. She delves into her cultural roots and rediscovers ancient Indian texts, offering new translations for a contemporary audience as Ravi Shankar has done with Andal, the woman devotional poet from Tamil Nadu, and Srikanth Reddy with Kalidas's Shakuntala. Indigenous myths are ploughed to rewrite her own identity as Usha Kishore does. Her poetics are wide ranging, her political affiliations multi-varied. She can be lyrical or narrative in mode. She is engaged with the environment, nature, the domestic sphere and her emotional landscape. She understands she is both Indian and American. And her writing becomes the landscape to explore the negotiation between variant parts of her soul. A negotiation that is an engagement, dialogue or quarrel. She is involved in collaborations, publishing, teaching and participation in festivals and conferences on both sides of the Atlantic. If the English language is elastic, the quintessential Indian soul is an elastic soul that absorbs influences and transplants itself. I think at the heart of every Indian, in her very cells is the message: humanity, the world is one. So, she can root and uproot and root again—and the diaspora writer funnels all this tumult into the alchemical writing process.

The diaspora poet is also a publisher and editor, like Ralph Nazareth, Kazim Ali, Pireeni Sundaralingam, Yogesh Patel, Yyuyutsu Sharma and Ravi Shankar, and realizes quickly the need for platforms, self-reliance and resource-generation. Unique to the diaspora writer is the amalgamation of a dual identity as American and Indian. Ralph Nazareth, who floated Yuganta Press in the 80s shared this with me:

The mid-80s were for many of us an apocalyptic time with constant anxieties about a nuclear holocaust. I was active in the Nuclear Freeze Movement and also part of a group of poets who were all writing passionately and urgently about these matters. It occurred to me and Linda, my wife that we should publish our work without depending on someone else to do it. So Yuganta was born in 1986. Note the name Yuganta. Apocalyptic. The end of an age! ...We published an anthology of our work titled *On The Crust of Earth*—again highlighting the precariousness of our lives in time. The very second book we published—

in keeping with my bicultural identity and our hope to publish works that made a “movement between worlds”—was Devi by Suzanne Ironbiter... I have mostly stuck to the criterion of “moving between worlds” for selecting manuscripts having published a Croatian, a Goan, a Trinidadian, among others.<sup>6</sup>

We think the first anthology was *Living in America: Poetry and Fiction by South Asian Writers*. Edited by Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, Westview Press, 1995. A few anthologies have emerged since like *Indivisible*, edited by a trio of editors. I share with you Ravi Shankar’s response when I asked him why he produced the anthology, *Language for a New Century* published by Norton:

We felt a pressing need at the time, post-9/11, to counter the reductive mass media view that all those from Asia and the Middle East, as well as the Diaspora, hewed to some counter-American philosophy. We wanted to humanize the East by presenting voices from the region, but also felt keenly that the venues for showcasing those voices did not exist. In fact, in my own graduate school education at Columbia University, I only encountered one or two poets of color in the entire discussion of the Western canon, and certainly no South Asian poets. Because those voices are so vital, we committed seven years of our life to bring this book out.<sup>7</sup>

So why did I instinctively feel a South Asian poetry festival was necessary in 2015? There were cultural festivals emerging like *Artwallah* in LA and *Jagriti* in Boston in the early 2000s. More recently, Jaipur Lit Fest- USA, SALA poetry reading session, IACC, New York, and *Tasveer* in Seattle have emerged but these festivals are multi-genre or the poetry readings happen under the auspices of a larger umbrella. The mega conference on South Asia was instituted at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 1971 with a focus on research and academia with categories for film, plays and performances. There is no sole poetry festival so it seemed like a vacuum waiting to be filled. But the truth is there were no statistics in my mind when I jumped in, I gave myself to an impulse, to an intuition. My co-director Pramila succinctly sums up our vision:

Writing about the cultural nuances in our experiences on two or three different continents opens up multiple questions and meaning-making as we navigate cultural gaps and hurdles. Immigrant diaspora stories are valuable as we perceive the rich tapestry of the United States that is reflected in the writing. Unfortunately, not much of South Asian writing in America is visible. Matwaala: South Asian diaspora festival fits into this yawning gap in American literature and provides a haven of meaning which is so desperately needed in our exploration and understanding of American history and literature...Heightened scrutiny of the other and the overwhelming drive to pigeonhole people of color brought on by a brutish right wing in the U.S., as well as the rigidity that has set into South Asian politics that restricts poets and journalists for their progressive views with threats and extra judicial killings. make Matwaala more relevant than ever. Matwaala highlights for folks everywhere the grayness in the chiaroscuro of our narratives. Matwaala poets are happily ensconced in the in-between spaces and from margins to centers, keeping their doors of plurality open.

The first forceful motive was representation and visibility. I graduated from Cambridge university in May 2019 with an Masters in Creative Writing. To my disbelief, our syllabus did not include a single South Asian writer while the program is actively recruiting a global studentship. How many South Asian poets are being published in mid and upper-tier literary journals? Pramila acutely observes: “Often, editors feature a special South Asian issue that is self-absolving to exclude writers thereon whilst ‘American’ writers are published

year-round.” How many South Asian poets feature in conferences, university reading series, writing residencies and retreats, and are faculty on writing residencies and retreats? *In relation* to the number of diaspora South Asian poets in the country?

Our mission was thus drafted:

To promote South Asian poetry in the American literary landscape and collaborate with other arts in North America through a festival, publications and mutual support among poets.

We have deliberately structured our festival as multi-sited, partnering with educational and cultural institutions. We want to expose students and faculty in CW and English departments to the rich texture of SA poetry. This year, our opening reading was at NYU and other readings were hosted by Hunter College, Nassau Community College and the Red Room and we were funded by Poets and Writers. In 2020, Stony Brook University has pledged its support. We feel our presence on university campuses may begin to have the power to change canon.

Earlier in the year, I looked at a number of poetry and literary journals that reconfirmed for me that the need for *Matwaala* was not the figment of my imagination. When I revisited the issue in Aug/Sep 2019, there was not much shift in statistical data. Kazim Ali’s issue on SA Poetry in Poetry magazine stood out but it raises questions of representation and editorial choice and he included Indian poets living in India. *Poetry Magazine* seems to be publishing more SA poets recently, the Aug/Sep issue carries poems by *Karthika Nair and Arvind Mehrotra*. Coincidentally, *Poetry Magazine* may have been the first or one of the first to publish the first South Asian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel-laureate in its June 1913 issue. But the South Asian diaspora community of poets is more than one Nobel laureate.

Our second reason was inclusivity and broadening the visibility of the number of SA poets who are doing stellar work but haven’t got the recognition due. Most US-SA poets are a repetitive roster of name-brand poets like Vijay Seshadri, late Meena Alexander, Kazim Ali, Ravi Shankar, and a few more. *Indivisible*, contains the work of about 50 poets and I guess since its publication in 2010, the number of emerging and established poets have gone up substantially. We wish to promote quality not elitism which has a self-defeating impact within the community. While we honor and respect accomplished names our goal is to bring more good poets to the limelight.

Inclusivity also means softening borders and we include all of South Asia as we recognize concerns and strivings are similar. We include poets from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, Myanmar, Maldives, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. We achieved the goal of inviting the UK diaspora this year and one of them was awarded our 2019 poet of honor award. Our poet of honor award is not just to recognize talent or stature but service and support to fellow poets. I initiated the idea of a *Matwaala* mug with lines from the poetry of the poet-of-honor. We also issued out first *Matwaala* e-anthology edited painstakingly by Pramila and Zilka Joseph. We were able to pay a website designer due to collective funding from poets.

The third reason is one of voice; a term with ramifications. While our aim is to facilitate the absorption of SA poets into the American literary tradition, consciousness and canon, it must happen as a valid voice that is American. Our aim is not to isolate the SA voice but to solidify it as a thread within the larger tapestry of American poetry. A voice that should not have to alter to be accepted as American. Poets should not be forced to sound

or write a certain way and get rejected because subject matter or cultural concerns are not 'American' enough and variant from the Poetry Industry Standards. So, we foresee it will become necessary to establish a publishing house eventually to make a small dent into who and what is being published. We took our first step with an online anthology this year. On our *Matwaala* website, under the Press description we raise the question of voice-integrity. Our present political and social climate bespoke the urgency for the dignity of all voices in this country. Perhaps, this need was palpable at our 2017 fest in NYC when 17 poets came out to feature at the *Matwaala* Big Read.

There is another interesting facet to the concern of voice. There is no *one* South Asian voice just as there is not just one feminism. We come from a pluralistic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural country where you will find Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, Christian, Sufi and Hindu Indians. All of these need a platform unbroken by narrow constraints or political agendas. *Matwaala* hopes to unify not scatter or split voices. Our four poets-of-honor for each of our four festivals have been a Parsi, Muslim, Christian and Hindu, all male—nominated by two women directors. Of this Ralph Nazareth, has joked, only women would have the heart to do so! It is true, these individuals were richly deserving and gender did not dictate out choice.

Post four editions I am confident of the validity of our vision. At each festival, I have sensed an excitement, a kinship and validation. Community and friendship is the keynote diminishing hierarchy and competition. The 2020 festival at Stony Brook University, NY was replaced by video recordings in lieu of the festival on campus due to Covid. In 2020, *Matwaala* is slated to feature four readings by poets of color in four categories: African American, Native American, South/Central American and Mexican.

Poetry is a kind of bread, it is shared and fills our bellies as a comfort food for the soul. Time and time again this unfolds experientially in the festivals. Plus, the magical moments from time to time: *Poets and Writers* supported us this year applauding our efforts and carried a write up of our festival on its blog. In 2019, Salman Rushdie turned up at our opening at NYU slipping into the room invisibly! In 2015, I can't forget driving my van jiggle-jangling with poets to the Dialogue Institute, a Turkish organization for our first reading. We were drunk on something not alcoholic. In 2017, seventeen poets appeared to read at our big read at AAWW. It was the political climate that triggered an unconscious need for solidarity drawing out senior and emerging poets with equality. At Nassau community college, Pramila devised a session wherein creative writing students and the Muslim student's union read poems by South Asian poets aloud. It was a moving and jubilatory moment to hear youth also recite their own poems as we sat down at a meal together.

My opening remarks from the 2015 festival are relevant:

While this is a celebration of the talent of a certain diaspora, this is ultimately the celebration of poetry. We are poets because we dare to say the unsaid and we hear the unheard. No poet is a fine or great poet only because he or she belongs to this or that ethnicity. A good poet is one because he/she is attuned to the universal unmasking itself in his/her individual sensibility. Today, you will hear voices that are rooted and yet fly. Voices that break down barriers. Voices that dare to be South Asian, American and simply human.

I summoned Gandhi's spirit at the beginning of this keynote and end with it—altered a bit mischievously:

Be the change you want to see. Be intoxicated with it and intoxicate others with it.

POEMS BY SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA POETS (Excerpts)

**Enough!**

By Usha Akella (Austin, Texas)

People let us say it.  
Bring back our caged children to a field of sunflowers,  
open our land to people as we would our palms  
to catch a raindrop,  
bring back Aylan in blue shorts  
washed up as a fish, snuggled in sand,  
let us not say again: he did not make it,  
let children not have to tell their stories.

Let us bring back Gulsoma, seven years old,  
oil her back scarred like a cluster of sardines,  
let us hear her laughter before it was married,  
let Malala not be shot in the head,  
let Karlanot have to say 43, 200 raped.  
And bring back Asifa Bano's rosy cheeks and chirping,  
let her bring back goats bare-footed,  
and roast warm chestnuts on a humble fire,  
let her eight-year old legs not be parted brutally for  
things other than what children do,  
and bring back all the murdered girl infants  
still as stone swaddled in earth.

And the police/ traffickers/ abductors/ mothers/ fathers/ sisters/ brothers  
who kill/ sell/ abuse/ rape/ shoot their own,  
let us hang them as rotting fruit from trees.  
And people, we who know too much with our tentacles of knowing  
like octopuses with many eyes,  
how much of knowing do we need,  
before we say it?

**Dot Sale**

By Pramila Venkateswaran (Long Island, NY)

What's on your forehead?  
Those stickers come in red?  
One-size-fits-all dots  
on sale  
in Bloomingdale's  
Is that your G-spot?  
Tantra-yantra, baby?  
Your kundalini?  
...  
D'you see fuckin' double?  
Does it mean you're available?  
You're kosher, right?  
A homey girl—  
I like that...

### Thirtha 12

By Pramila Venkateswaran (Long Island, NY)

We are hyphens, male-female, Hindi-Tamil-English-  
American-Sanskrit, mantra-hymn-namaz, not ciphers  
as parents yelled out to kids playing hookey. You'll  
be a cipher: curse transformed; our emptiness  
ills with patterns of light;  
We imitate divinity, feet parked in different hemispheres.

I taste Cauvery in New York, glinting thinly where it crosses  
Karnataka into Tamil Nadu; a clump of cane between  
a well and a home marking the border...  
We are on both shores at once, both or more?  
Where the Indian ocean holds the Atlantic  
and the Pacific, waters wed  
cobalt and ash; the depths are emerald; tides rise  
and fall, storms rage, unconfined by borders.

### Ferrying Secrets

By Ralph Nazareth (*Stamford, Connecticut, USA*)

Allen Ginsberg at Stew Leonards shows...

Allen Ginsberg at Stew Leonards Shows Me the Democratic Vistas of Unending Cheeses, Walks  
Me Past Singing Cows, Banjo-strumming Bands and the Seven Deadly Sins Chief Among Them  
Gluttony and Talks to Me with Buddha Compassion at the Checkout Counter.

I need you Allen to tell me go ahead bury your head in peppers, it's ostrich-like I  
know but see what happened to our heroes  
I need you Allen to show me how to clown my way to wisdom, monkey or no  
monkey on my back  
I need you Allen to show me how to look the world in the eye while my eyes fill  
up with sorrow  
I need you Allen to tell me it's o.k. buddy you fell asleep when I'd asked you to  
stay awake and touch  
I am, don't you see, all forgiveness, see how the milk flows from my almost  
mother breasts, my Blake and Whitman breasts  
come lay your heavy head on me and drink, there's more where it came from, for  
I have a direct line to the goddess  
I wrote her a kaddish and she wrote me a blank check, drink baby drink and don't  
worry about growing up  
I need you Allen to remind me of my ancestors, like them or not, that's where the  
songs come from, and the curses  
and we must know them both and hold them in till our holy throats croak and  
our holy sphincters burst  
and there is the *pralaya* and the night will not end until we say brothers and  
sisters, we're o.k. it's not our fault  
we knew about it but it's not our fault, could've would've should've done  
something about it but we didn't



**The Hands that Lit the Shabbat Lamps**

By Zilka Joseph (Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA)

My mother's hands –what did they dream?  
Tough and weathered they are,  
heavy, thick, square-  
nailed, strong; did a lifetime  
of labor  
in a man's world; bore the weight of all our needs,  
the brunt  
of a mother-in-law's tongue, Dad's quick temper. How hard  
those pale hands slaved –  
tinted with turmeric, smelling of garlic, cilantro,  
or cloves, cinnamon and butter on high holidays  
and at night Ponds Cold Cream. For special  
times she wore  
nail polish for silk sari evenings, or gold jewelry events  
dad's official dinners, for weddings. The rougher  
her fingers grew, the more  
she slid into her shell,  
hiding her true heart. Just as her mother's  
had even before the fourth,  
the unwanted daughter –my mother,  
was born. When did her palms  
turn to steel? Child given extra  
work, less education than her sisters, even less play?  
These hands so old now, so brave,  
what did they dream? These hands that taught us how  
to light our shabbat lamps? When did they have soft  
skin? How wise these hands ...

**Sam the Super**

By Ravi Shankar (New York, USA)

You wouldn't take my bald father for a quirky man,  
since his bearing is quintessentially Tamil-Brahmin,  
a Tam-Bram for the uninitiated, with the firmest hand  
when it comes to discipline or studies. He leers at ham  
and beer alike. Believes what genes conspire within  
him makes him purer than you. Not the sort of man  
you'd ever imagine would in top hat willingly stand  
in a Chinese restaurant smelling of wet dog and Ramen  
to pull silk scarves from his mouth with his own hand,  
yet there he was, amazingly, like Borat in Kazakhstan  
but without the parody and much to my young chagrin,  
playing the part of Magician, much more than mere man.  
I was his caped and turbaned assistant who he'd demand  
tap on boxes, say magical phrases, hide in a flour bin  
he'd saw in half. If not a spectacle witnessed firsthand,

I wouldn't believe it either. Soon as he'd pull out a cyan hanky to mop his brow in the parking lot, his large grin would fade to a frown. He'd warn me not to say "man" or "dude." When I resisted, he pulled me to car by hand.

### Guatemalan Worry Dolls

By Varsha Saraiyya Shah (Houston, Texas)

Earthy, skinny thimble-like figurines  
woven with twine and jute.  
Once they tumble out of their bamboo box  
onto my bed

open-armed, wide-eyed  
I place them on my palm, a gift  
from my teenage daughter long ago, a salve  
for my worries.

Their tribal circle kind of my close family.

Black, a fallen marriage.  
The trio of Red-Orange-Peach my children.  
Dots and curly lines for eyes and brows, two  
with no frowns.  
Gold hard to label worthy of study perhaps  
a comedy of forgotten errors.  
The Green promises hills of peace and  
gardens yet to explore,

I never hid the dolls beneath my pillow  
to put them to work the way  
my daughter instructed.

Together we wander through the rooms  
of legends they boast of tonight  
their faces focused on mine but seem far away

as if saying,  
take a hike to the Highlands, dear Maya  
tell them we all are myths and legends  
you've got nothing to worry.

Austin, Texas, USA

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Poetry wall exhibit: [https://www.lucy.cam.ac.uk/blog/wall-of-poems?fbclid=IwAR0Jn2FCe2RH7z2u-kluuyW\\_v\\_L8aTy6lR4TqipSeJT4yGMEt7hv8YT1sPI](https://www.lucy.cam.ac.uk/blog/wall-of-poems?fbclid=IwAR0Jn2FCe2RH7z2u-kluuyW_v_L8aTy6lR4TqipSeJT4yGMEt7hv8YT1sPI) and <https://indiacurrents.com/matwaala-poetry-and-diaspora-culture/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/nightfall-in-the-city-of-hyderabad/>

<sup>3</sup> Mathur, Anurag. *The inscrutable Americans*. Rupa.Co, 1991, pp. 9-12.

<sup>4</sup> Peeradina, Saleem. "Bandra". *First Offence*. Newground, Bombay, 1980, p.13.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, Meena. "Cosmopolitan". *Quickly changing river*. TriQuarterly Books, 2008, pp. 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> From personal email to author.

<sup>7</sup> From personal email to author.

# The Nation-state and the Indian English Novel in the Aftermath of Economic Liberalization in India

POONAM SHARMA

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**Abstract:** In *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Robert J C Young discusses a continuing economic hegemony of former colonisers in the third world. He argues that decolonization in this situation is merely a shift in Gramscian civil and political societies since the system of autonomous nation-states is in fact “the means through which international capital exercises imperialist control.”<sup>1</sup> After the dissolution of the Soviet Union when late capitalism successfully propagated its economic models, a redefining of the term ‘nation-state’ has been in process. The relevance of ‘Postcolonialism’ as a theoretical movement is also questioned since nation-states are increasingly dictated by multinational corporations.<sup>2</sup>

‘Nation’ was formulated with a Gandhian ideology in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan, Raja Rao, G V Desani, Kamala Markandaya, and ended up becoming a painful memory in the novels of post-partition period such as, Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* or Amitav Ghosh’s *Shadow Lines*. The present paper looks at the modalities through which the nation-state has evolved in contemporary fiction and the dynamic of its representation. With a specific focus on three novels published in the last three decades, the current chapter will focus on three ways in which the Indian nation-state is depicted in Indian English novels after 1990s. These include the portrayal of neo-liberal state and governance in contemporary fiction, the treatment of human bodies as citizens in these novels, and the modes in which sectionalism is portrayed.

**Keywords:** Nation-state, Postcolonialism, Neo-liberalism, Globalization, Communalism.

At the midnight of 14 August 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru’s speech “Tryst with Destiny” marked the eve of Indian independence and charted out a future for post-colonial India. The speech not only emphasized the idea of Indian nationhood but also provided a political framework for Indian literary studies. Several scholars including Alex Tickell, Sunil Khilnani, Jon Mee and M. K. Naik have explored the influence of Nehru’s speech on Indian literature, particularly on Indian English novels. Salman Rushdie even included Nehru’s speech in his *Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947–1997* to mark the role of English language in Indian literary prose (Rushdie xiii). Indian English novels in independent India such as *The Midnight’s Children* (1981), continued to look at this threshold moment to define Indian nation and its history.

More than half a century later, Alex Tickell finds a corresponding moment of importance for contemporary Indian writers in Dr Manmohan Singh’s budget speech of 1991 (Tickell 38). As India faced the external debt crisis at the turn of the twentieth century, Indian economy was remodelled to suit the era of neo-liberalism.<sup>1</sup> The Congress government

that came to power in June 1991 had to opt for an arrangement with the IMF and an adjustment loan with the World Bank. Manmohan Singh, who was the then Finance Minister of the country, introduced this new economic policy and transformed the Indian economic history. Rana Dasgupta in his analysis of Singh's budget speech finds significant parallels between his speech and Nehru's "Tryst with Destiny" (Dasgupta 58). With similar oratory skills, Singh presented his economic policy as an extension of Nehru's vision for Indian freedom and future (59). This paper analyses the effect of this momentous change on Indian English novels. It intends to examine if neo-liberalism and globalization have influenced the portrayal of the Indian nation-state in the Indian English novels as strongly as Indian independence and partition did in the last century.

The Indian nation-state emerged with Indian independence in 1947 and was influenced by the European concepts of sovereignty and national history. Priyamvada Gopal in *The Indian English Novel* has elaborated on how the European scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries emphasised on a written form of history to define the nation, and as a reaction, Indian scholars began to imagine and record India as a nation in prose history (Gopal 12).<sup>2</sup> Scholars such as Ranajit Guha have explained that the novel and the act of writing Indian history were born together in colonial India (Guha 55).<sup>3</sup> In a similar argument, Gopal has also called the novel in India as an essentially "post-colonial genre" because it focussed on the history of the nation in late nineteenth century and continued to reflect on nation and nationalism even in independent India (Gopal 14).

'Nation' was formulated with a Gandhian ideology in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan, Raja Rao, G V Desani, Kamala Markandaya, and ended up becoming a painful memory in the novels of post-partition period such as, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* or Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines*. The current paper looks at the modalities through which the nation-state has evolved in contemporary fiction and the dynamics of its representation.

The paper looks at three novels by contemporary Indian authors, Arundhati Roy and Arvind Adiga. The novels to be studied here include *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy, and *The White Tiger* (2008) by Arvind Adiga. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is the story of a transgender, Anjum, who is joined by several other socially outcast characters in her public and private struggles against the Indian nation-state. *The White Tiger*, Adiga's debut novel, is the story of a poor driver Balram who goes on to become a businessman by murdering his employer, Mr Ashok. Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things* narrates the story of a village in Kerala and the life of twin siblings Rahel and Estha. The twins are separated in their childhood due to the caste/class politics in their community and meet after two decades to seek some answers and discover how the dawn of globalization in India has transformed their village.

The focus of this paper is on three different ways in which the Indian nation-state is depicted in Indian English novels after 1990s. These include the portrayal of neo-liberal state and governance in contemporary fiction, the treatment of human bodies as citizens in these novels, and the modes in which sectionalism is portrayed. The paper explores whether the nature of the state has transformed in the face of neo-liberalism. Also, is the sectarian politics in India related to its economic failures? What is the nature of contemporary democratic government and how does it control or commoditize the human body in these novels?

### The Neo-liberal State and Governance in Contemporary Fiction

"If I were making a country, I'd get the sewage pipes first, then the democracy, then I'd go about giving pamphlets and statues of Gandhi to other people, but what do I know? I'm just a murderer!"<sup>4</sup>

In his essay, "Patriotism and Its Futures" Arjun Appadurai mentions the terms "postnation" and "postnational" to describe globalization. He calls it "the process of moving to a global order in which the nation-state has become obsolete and other formations for allegiance and identity have taken its place" (Appadurai 169).<sup>5</sup> But in light of what Appadurai and others like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri highlight about the current structure of a nation, one realises that the discourse on 'state' and governance is largely absent from these arguments as if the nation is an apolitical entity. The question here is whether nation-states have become local agents of corporate interests and as a consequence have lost their sovereignty or whether state apparatuses subjugate their own citizens to enable the economic interests of transnational corporations? This section explores the portrayal of this corporatized nation-statehood in the Indian English novel.

Though Anjum's story is introduced with partition in *The Ministry*, the plot unfolds during the last decade of the twentieth century. Unlike *The God*, *The Ministry* is not the story of a single family caught up in the caste-class politics. Rather, it is a chronicle of the post-independence India from the perspectives of several marginalised sections in the country. Authors like Michiko Kakutani have stated that the novel is "less focussed on the personal and private than on the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation" (Kakutani). The Kashmir issue is a legacy of partition that continues to haunt post-colonial India. It does not merely define contemporary relations between India and Pakistan but is also symptomatic of the relation between the Indian state and its citizens. The failures of the Indian state are highlighted in chapters narrating the state programmed violence in Kashmir. It is only amplified when people from myriad regions of Indian territory, for instance people from Naxalbari regions in central India and the people tormented in Gujarat massacres of 2002, assemble in the national capital to protest. Ironically, Major Amrik Singh uses anti-Sikh riots of 1984 to receive an asylum in the USA presenting himself as a victim, while horrific oppression against Kashmiris under his watch goes unrecorded by the government. This problematises subalternity and its credibility as a foundational unit of identity politics.

National discourses are also presented as unreliable since they are constantly reworked and moulded to serve changing state regimes and their respective propaganda machineries. Kulsum Bi's attachment with the light and sound show at the Red fort in Old Delhi is based on the fact that it used to narrate the story of the glorious Mughal empire, while concomitantly alluding to the pervasive role of transgenders in court politics. But with the advent of 'Gujarat ka lalla' as the Indian Prime Minister, the show is revised, and the Islamic references are eliminated from it:

Soon centuries of Muslim rule would be stripped of poetry, music and architecture and collapsed into the sound of the clash of swords and a bloodcurdling war cry that lasted only a little longer than the husky giggle that Ustad Kulsoom Bi had hung her hopes on. The remaining time would be taken up by the story of Hindu glory. As always, history would be a revelation of the future as much as it was a study of the past. (Roy 407)

India's representative democracy is constantly put into question in Adiga's *The White Tiger* too. Mr Ashok displays a middleclass ignorance when he explains to his wife Pinky

that a large portion of Indian population is uneducated and hence, parliamentary democracy in such a country is a foolish idea, “*That’s the whole tragedy of this country*” (Adiga 10). Though hurt by what Ashok had said, Balram believes it to be true and justified, and calls his life’s story as “*The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian*” - an alternative title for the novel. The story of his upbringing is the story of how a “half-baked fellow is produced” (11). As he reads aloud his search poster put up by the police, he goes on to elaborate on his details. To every single detail provided by the police in his introduction, he writes an entire narrative behind it for the Chinese President. This narrative, like the narrative of Amrik Singh’s state purported violence against Kashmiris in *The Ministry*, never finds a mention in state records.

As in the epigraph of this section, making a comparison with China, Balram satirically states,

I gather you yellow-skinned men, despite your triumphs in sewage, drinking water, and Olympic gold medals, still don’t have democracy. Some politician on the radio was saying that that’s why we Indians are going to beat you: we may not have sewage, drinking water, and Olympic gold medals, but we *do* have democracy. (96)

With the use of satire, several organs of Indian representative democracy are portrayed as failed projects in the novel. Government hospitals and schools are all decaying with corruption and inefficiency. All in the name of a government hospital, Balram would see three different foundation stones for a hospital, “laid by three different politicians before three different elections” (47). But Adiga is also able to explain the other side of the story where the schoolteacher who had stolen the government money meant for children’s mid-day meal did so because he had not been paid his salary in six months.

Even elections in the rural India are portrayed as a mere farcical caricature of the democratic process. In a tongue in cheek manner, Balram explains how people barely get to vote in his side of the country, “like eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra, the voters discuss the elections in Laxmangarh” (98). Balram’s father is in a complete state of shock and awe to think of “people in the other India who get to vote for themselves- isn’t that something?” (100). The only man who goes to vote in Laxmangarh, despite the warning, is killed by goons and the police.

Centred on the historical monument, Jantar Mantar, the third chapter in *The Ministry* is also a glance at the unfulfilled promises of Indian democracy. The historical structure was offered as a protest site to people by the Delhi police in exchange of the parliament street.<sup>6</sup> In the novel, the site becomes rallying point of all those who fight and wish to be heard against the repressive regime of Indian state: “communists, seditionists, secessionists, revolutionaries, dreamers, idlers, crackheads, crackpots, all manner of freelancers, and wise men” (Roy 101). Within this crowd, Dr Azad Bharatiya (literally, the Free Indian who appears to be a caricature of Arundhati Roy herself as a hopeless political activist) who had entered “the eleventh year, third month and seventeenth day of his hunger strike” is introduced as someone who gives a call for true liberal democracy (125). Dr Bharatiya sums up all the issues Roy has consistently raised in her polemical writings over the past two decades against the Indian state. He stands as the representative of all those who find it difficult to protest continuously at Jantar Mantar.

One aspect of living as an Indian is unanimously shared in *The God, The Ministry* and *The White Tiger*. It is to be haunted by the domination of America on the Indian economy. Dr Bharatiya is a spokesperson against this dominance. While even the dogs of American President reside in the five-star hotel of Delhi, he is forced to stand on road protesting

against capitalism. He lives in a continuous fear of being electronically surveyed and murdered by American government. Ironically, the cars that are employed to hit and kill him on the road, Bharatiya never misses to mention, are of Indian companies and driven by American agents. From T.V. channels to mining companies, everything is funded by the American government. Even the Union Carbide Gas victims from Bhopal assemble at Jantar Mantar in protest, "poisoned so many years ago. But nobody cares. Those (American) dogs just sit there on that Meridian Hotel windowsill and watch us die" (130).

Indigenous and local entrepreneurs are also left vulnerable by the government to the forces of global market. Mammachi's 'Paradise Pickles and Preserves' in *The God* is ambiguously banned by the Food Products Organization (FPO mark became mandatory since 2006 following the Food Safety and Standards Act) because "as per their books", Mammachi's products were neither jam nor jelly: "too thin for jelly and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency, they said" (Roy 30). Hakim Abdul Majid's Rooh Afza ('Elixir of the Soul') suffers a similar fate in *The Ministry*. Though it had survived wars and even partition, it "was, like most things in the world, trumped" by an American multinational beverage corporation, "Coca-Cola" (Roy 13).

In a similar fashion, Balram in *The White Tiger* encounters Indian poverty always around American advertisements and buildings. While roaming on the streets of Jangpura, Delhi, at night he sees a "dead tired" rickshaw-puller going to sleep on roadside, next to his rickshaw. At the back of his rickshaw is an advertising sticker of a gym instructor asking, "IS EXCESS WEIGHT A PROBLEM FOR YOU?...the mascot of the gym- an American with enormous white muscles- smiled at me from above the slogan. The rickshaw-pullers snoring filled the air" (Adiga 220). The looming image of global forces of capitalism continue to overpower and subjugate the marginalised in these novels highlighting the inefficiency of Indian state to protect them from transnational corporations.

### **Segregation and the sealing of human body in contemporary novels**

The story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen.<sup>7</sup>

In the last few decades, several debates on globalisation have explored the politics of segregating the body of a domestic or migrant or foreign worker, and ascribing servility to it (Ehrenreich 85-103) (Harvey 19-27). Similar to racism, capitalism politicises the human body with insider-outsider markers. As indicated by Deleuze and Guattari, global capital "tends toward a threshold of decoding that will destroy the socius in order to make it a body without organs" (Deleuze Guattari 33). It turns work into an apparatus that "codes flows, invests organs, and marks bodies" by "tattooing, excising, incising, carving, scarifying, mutilating, encircling, and initiating" (144). This stands in contrast to the primitive form of economy that was linked with the local and based on the relations between people. In contrast, global capital reduces all people and their relations into labour machines.

This dichotomy between the older form of globalisation and the neo-capitalised one is explored through human bodies in contemporary novels, as also argued by critics like Robbie Goh.<sup>8</sup> The difference between the bodies of the people residing in the 'darkness' and those residing in the 'lightness' are stark and highlighted throughout *The White Tiger*.

From the very beginning of the novel, India is geographically divided into darkness and light and so is the human body. Looking at his colleague's diseased lips which is also from darkness, Balram is able to understand it as "the skin disease (vitiligo), which afflicts

so many poor people in our country. I don't know why you get it, but once you do, your skin changes colour from brown to pink" (Adiga 123). Ironically, the poor man leaving his true appearance is turned into a lookalike of an American, "sometimes a fellow's whole body has changed color, and as you walk past, you think, *An American!* You stop to gape; you want to go near and touch. Then you realize it's just one of us, with that horrible condition" (123).

First, we get to look at the dark India where children are "too lean and short for their age, and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India" (20). Human body in the village is also constantly animalised. Balram's father believes that he has been treated like a donkey all his life and now, "All I want is that one son of mine- at least one- should live like a man" (30). The struggle between man and animals for resources and identity is so intense that real animals are healthier than poor villagers. Balram explains how their water buffalo was the healthiest in the family and this was true for every household of the village. As a child Balram is unable to understand his father's dream for him, "what it meant to live like a man was a mystery. I thought it meant being like Vijay, the bus conductor" (30). Even though Vijay belonged to a lower caste family, he is able to secure class mobility through corrupt and calculative means. His body is always finely clad in a uniform unlike the half-naked bodies of Balram's family members.

The difference between the rich man and the poor man's body is made obvious in the beginning of the novel itself. Balram explains that rich man's body is a "premium cotton pillow", but his own kinds are different. His father's,

spine was knotted rope, the kind that women use in villages to pull water from wells; the clavicle curved around his neck in high relief, like a dog's collar; cuts and nicks and scars, like little whip marks in his flesh, ran down his chest and waist, reaching down below his hipbones and his buttocks. (27)

But Balram here is the bridge between these two forms of bodies. He is able to not only differentiate between the two but also gets to choose between them since he dreads the fate of his father and then his brother,

I couldn't stop thinking of Kishan's body. They were eating him alive in there! They would do the same thing to him that they did to Father-scoop him out from the inside and leave him weak and helpless, until he got tuberculosis and died on the floor of a government hospital (86)

Balram is a misfit in the India of darkness by the virtue of his body. Despite his pleadings, he is "too thin" to be taken as a factory worker in Bangalore. The human body is reified in contemporary capitalist system and this commodification of a poor man's body is most vividly expressed in the said scene. The contractor asks everyone to take off their shirts since he needs to "'see a man's nipples before I give him a job!' He looked at my chest; he squeezed the nipples- slapped my butt- glared into my eyes – and then poked the stick against my thigh: 'Too thin! Fuck off!'" (55).

When the plot begins, Balram's body is in the darkness, but it metamorphoses into the body, as well as name, of Mr Ashok by the end. Even in his finishing act of this transformation, he touches Ashok's neck before killing him. He recalls his father's body,

the junction of the neck and the chest, the place where all the tendons and veins stick out in high relief, was my favourite spot. When I touched this spot, the pit of my father's neck, I controlled him- I could make him stop breathing with the pressure of a finger. (285)



Balram kills Ashok from the same spot that he mentions in reference to his father. In the struggle between the globalised bodies, both primitive and capitalised, the capitalised economy wins over the primitive one by eliminating every contact between Balram and his family in the darkness. He casts off all human contacts of kinship and locality. This individuation of the human body is not only a transformation of identity but a metamorphosis of one form of capital production into another: changing local ties of human bonding into the world of formal outsourcing. Balram is thus not the servile body but the man-eater, the symbol of India's rising economy.

Just as Balram leaves no traces of his former identity, Velutha, a paravan carpenter from *The God of Small Things*, "left no ripples in the water. No footprints on the shore" (Roy 289). As explained by S B Kaufmann, Paravans form a Tamil caste group among the Roman Catholics in South India. Paravans used to be important brokers and mariners in colonial India.<sup>9</sup> Their economic downfall has been as untraceable as Velutha's murder by the Ayemenem police. Velutha's untouchability is a form of primitive machinery. The upper-caste policemen could torture Velutha since "any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature- had been severed long ago" (Roy 309). The very first mention of Velutha in the novel is in terms of his shining "bared body" (6). Rahel's earliest memories of Velutha are of recognizing him from his behind because of his familiar back that had a "light brown birthmark shaped like a pointed dry leaf" (73). His bodily descriptions are symbolic of his indigenous paravan identity born and connected with nature in contrast to the artificial make up and expensive saree-clad body of Baby Kochamma. The paravan body is discriminated on the basis of its olfactory characteristics too. Baby Kochamma is disgusted to imagine Ammu making love to Velutha since, "How could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed, they have a particular smell, these Paravans?" (78). Velutha's body, however, has been shaped by his hard work as a paravan carpenter. His labour has made his body beautiful. In contrast to Ammu's family, Velutha as a paravan carpenter with his leftist ideology fail to compete against the global modes of production with his hand-made toys. His murder at the hands of the Ayemenem police, is a symbolic death of the indigenous at the hands of a state heading fast towards privatisation.

The indigenous body of the Kathakali performer is also subjected to the violence of capitalized globalisation in the novel. As Kathakali dancer is "planed and polished, pared down, harnessed wholly to the task of story-telling" he is forced to live in destitution and penury in the face of competition from the globalised world. His body is mentioned as "condemned goods" (230). His children do not opt for his art and go on to become clerks and bus conductors. As the narrator explains his desolation, he says, "in despair he turns to tourism. He enters the market. He hawks the only thing he owns. *The stories that his body can tell*" (Ibid.).

### **The Interconnection of Globalization and the Communalised Nation**

"Servants need to abuse other servants. It's been bred into us, the way Alsatian dogs are bred to attack strangers. We attack anyone who's familiar."<sup>10</sup>

Milind Wakankar in *Subalternity and Religion* has argued that communalism in South Asia was a result of two 'ruptures' in Indian history. First due to the colonial governance where caste and religion-based electorates gave rise to new identity categories, and

secondly, because of the emergence of bourgeois nationalism (Wakankar 41). With the emergence of globalization and neo-liberalism at the end of the twentieth century, other dimensions to communalism have been added. This is done in collaboration with the open market economy in India. For instance, Aijaz Ahmed in *On Communalism and Globalisation*, calls contemporary Hindu communalism as “the failure of the liberal order to offer radical solutions to mass misery” (Ahmed 25). Ahmed calls globalization as a cause of income inequalities and the loss of economic sovereignty. The resurgence of RSS is thus a result of its ability to provide its members or “affiliate (them) a sense of political belonging” (25). Ahmed argues that such battles are fought “in the hope that the people shall...be induced to forget the real battles, namely the oppression wrought by the WTO and their own government” (26). It is this aspect of people’s struggles that has been reflected and expressed in the recent Indian English novels.

Velutha’s fate in *The God* is most severely dictated by Comrade K N M Pillai’s hypocrite designs and deceit. Pillai is clever to separate Velutha’s caste and his political affiliation in front of the police. He indirectly executes the murder of Velutha and raises his voice for the downtrodden only when it serves his own purpose. The failed project of communism in Kerala is shown in all its decadence in the novel. Economic liberalization in the 1990s served the purpose of elite and upper-caste communist leaders such as Pillai in the novel. The old Ayemenem office of the Communist Party, ‘Lucky Press’ where “rousing lyrics of Marxist Party songs were printed and distributed” has lost its all glory and purpose by the time Rahel visits the village as an adult (Roy 13). The red flag at the top of the office had turned old and faded. Comrade K N M Pillai takes pride in his son, symbolically named Lenin, who had moved to Delhi working as a service contractor for foreign embassies.

The Subaltern Studies group<sup>11</sup> which dominated literary theory in the end of the twentieth century assumed India to be a “pre-capitalist” society (Chandavarkar 189). For instance, Dipesh Chakrabarty conceived India as a world divided by hierarchies or “strong primordial loyalties of community, language, religion, caste and kinship”, in contrast to the first world countries where egalitarianism has already crossed the pre-capitalist stage of hierarchies (Chakrabarty 68). However, as scholars such as R. Chandavarkar have strongly argued, the sectionalism of the Indian working class was “neither a symptom of a pre-capitalist economy nor a derivative of the bonds of village and neighbourhood, caste and religion”, but it was “accentuated and developed by industrialization” (Chandavarkar 88). Balram in *The White Tiger* is quick to reveal to his upper-caste Hindu employers that their other driver Ram Persad is a Muslim hiding as a Hindu to get work at their place. Embedded in this act is a deep-rooted competition for employment where ethnic identities are pitted against each other for gaining profit. Though he has moments of introspection, Balram still prefers to use Ram Persad’s Muslim identity against him in order to secure better prospects for himself. Mammachi and Ammu’s labour for Mammachi’s ‘Paradise Pickles and Preserves’ in *The God* are unacknowledged and unrewarded by the virtue of their gender. Chacko who neither has skills nor any performance in the factory, claims it as his own by the virtue of being the only man in the family. Ammu is able to see his male chauvinism in separating her and Mammachi from the fruits of their labour. At another instance, Ammu is also severely critical of his “Marxist mind and feudal libido” when he sexually exploits the lower caste working women in the factory (Roy 168).

**Conclusion: "History and Literature enlisted by Commerce"**

As the shores of Meenachal river in *The God of Small Things* are polluted and transformed into tourist hotel resorts by the late 1990s, Roy explains the strange connection between the history of these lands and the literature being produced on it. Guest houses, ironically called as 'heritage', take pride in the oldest house among them because it belonged to 'Kerala's Mao Tse-tung', Comrade E M S Namboodiripad.<sup>12</sup> As Roy calls it, the episode is "History and literature enlisted by commerce. Kurtz and Karl Marx joining palms to greet rich guests as they stepped off the boat" (Roy 126).

The focus of contemporary novels is on migrant workers, class inequality among citizens or the treatment of various ethnic minorities at the hands of the state. While authors like Rushdie or Amitav Ghosh had turned to history to define India, contemporary authors are more concerned with the idea of India as a nation-state in contemporary times. Priyamvada Gopal in her conclusion of *The Indian English Novel* (2009) argued that one of the most visible changes in contemporary fiction in the wake of migration is "the rewriting of the idea of a plural and secular India in the ferocious image of communal and majoritarian forces" (177). She goes on to give references of Gita Hariharan's *In Time of Siege*, Amit Chaudhuri's *Freedom Song*, Shama Futehally's *Reaching Bombay Central*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and similar others. As also explored in the paper, this shift in the recent Indian fiction towards sectarianism in India is also one of the outcomes of economic liberalization. What Gopal calls a "rewriting of the idea of a plural and secular India" emerges as an outcome of a globalized Indian state (177).

In contemporary Indian English novels, there is an increased awareness of what the nation constitutes for its citizens and it emerges as a draconian concept. In the fiction of the previous century, there existed a disillusionment with only the state machinery. In contemporary fiction, one witnesses a disillusionment with the entire idea of a nation-state and an upsurge in the depiction of its subordination at the hands of transnational corporate interests.

As this paper had set out to explore, Indian English novels after economic liberalization, unlike the postcolonial novels in the twentieth century, are neither nostalgic for their native identity nor are they lost in the moment of Indian independence. Instead, Indian economic position and politics is presented with a sharp focus in the present-day novels. There are a few other recent novels of similar themes that deserve a mention here. Indira Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) and Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012) present a dystopian vision of global south in the twenty first century. Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* (2008-15) is also a fresh look at the roots of global capital in South Asia.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Robert J C Young, *Postcolonialism; An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2001), p.47.
- <sup>2</sup> Scholars such as Arjun Appadurai (1996), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* (2000) or other postcolonial critics such as Ali Behdad (2005), have discussed the weakening power of nation-states in contemporary era of globalization.
- <sup>3</sup> To understand the circumstances around economic liberalisation in India, I referred to Amit Bhaduri and Deepak Nayyar's *The Intelligent Person's Guide to Liberalization*, and *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy* by Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss.
- <sup>4</sup> Partha Chatterjee has also discussed the emergence of Indian nationalism and the nation-state as a "derivative" of European nationalism in *National Thought in the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
- <sup>5</sup> Adiga, *The White Tiger*, p.96.
- <sup>6</sup> Appadurai emphasises on the current situation of "postnation" as the new norm which also refers to diasporic nationalisms.
- <sup>7</sup> As also mentioned by Arundhati Roy in her essay "Trickledown Revolution", in *Broken Republic* (99-100).
- <sup>8</sup> Adiga, *The White Tiger*, p.27.
- <sup>9</sup> Goh goes on to differentiate between the old form of capitalism and the new form of capitalism by differentiating between the feudal bodies presented animalistically in Adiga's novel and the smooth and flawless bodies of the overseas Indians in the novel (Goh 341).
- <sup>10</sup> Paravan is a Tamil caste among Roman Catholics in South India. For a detailed understanding of this caste in South India, I referred to S. B. Kaufmann's "A Christian Caste in Hindu Society: Religious Leadership and Social Conflict among the Paravan of Southern Tamil Nadu", *Modern Asian Studies*, 15.2 (1981), 203-234.
- <sup>11</sup> Adiga, *The White Tiger* p.130.
- <sup>12</sup> R Chandavarkar explains this group in reference to the wide variety of work produced by scholars based at Canberra, Sussex, and Oxford, in 1970s-80s with a shared purpose to "investigate the history of the subaltern classes" (Chandavarkar 175-196). Following postmodernism in 1980s, class analysis of South Asia was dominated by the Subaltern Studies group. Based on E P Thompson's Marxist historiography of the English working class (1963), Subaltern Studies provided a platform for some historians who collaborated with Ranajit Guha to recover the colonial history of India's subaltern classes.
- <sup>13</sup> E M S Namboodiripad was the first Chief Minister of Indian state of Kerala. Namboodiripad was from the Communist Party of India (CPI) who became the first non-Indian National Congress Chief Minister in independent India. Roy explains the politics of communism in Kerala and its failures in detail in *The God of Small Things*, pp.66-70.

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# Renegotiating Diasporic Identity: A Transnational Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

MUSARRAT SHAMEEM

**Abstract:** Gauri Mitra is an American immigrant from India as well as a brilliant professor of Philosophy in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* (2013). She embodies the concept of an unconventional femininity. Gauri's character defies the usual characteristics of Indian women in general of her time, a time that goes back to the 1960s-70s. Gauri reverses the role of a wife and a mother by embracing the role of an individual devoted to academic pursuits and personal achievements. As a further reversal of her gender role she engages in lesbianism at a certain stage of her life. Her character contains possibilities that can be analyzed to reveal a new woman having the prospect of becoming an example of transnational feminism. This article analyzes Gauri's character based on the idea of transnational feminism as established by Inderpal Grewal in the book *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. However, other ideas such as neo-cosmopolitanism and queer sexuality, ideas which are associated with transnational feminism are also explored in the article in order to understand the multiplicity of identity that the female protagonist of *The Lowland* possesses.

**Keywords:** Immigrant, transnational feminism, cosmopolitanism, multiplicity of identity

Gauri Mitra is an Indian immigrant to America portrayed as a brilliant professor of Philosophy in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* (2013). She embodies the concept of an unconventional femininity. Gauri's character goes against the usual traits of Indian women of her time, that is to say, of the 1960s-70s. Gauri reverses the role of a wife and a mother by embracing the role of an individual devoted to academic pursuits and personal achievements. In a further reversal of gender role, she embraces lesbianism at a certain stage of her life. In this article Gauri's character is studied in terms of three phases. The first section analyzes her character from a postcolonial feminist perspective. The second section focuses on her shifting roles using postmodern feminist lens. Finally, the diasporic turn of her character is studied. However, all these three perspectives stem from the ideas of transnational feminism, new-cosmopolitanism, and queer sexuality.

Inderpal Grewal introduces the idea of transnational feminism by implying that this brand of feminism creates a connection between the gendered subject and her historical past. In the book *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* Grewal observes how in the United States gendered subjects are produced in relation to race, class, caste, and other social formations. She emphasizes the point that choice plays a significant role in shaping "a central ethical framework for feminist as well as neoliberal consumer practices and the imbrications of feminism with consumer culture" (Grewal 3). Grewal also notes that the gendered bodies are differentiated from each other according to their geographical location within which race, class, religion, and nationality are considered meaningful in shaping identity. The author wonders what possibilities feminism might have within the "neoliberalism" of the US and what kind of

"cosmopolitan knowledge" would be produced in the "neoliberal conditions" since the feminists working in this condition have to assume changing and contingent subject positions in order to avoid being "incapacitated by this neoliberalism" (Grewal 3-4). Thus, observes Grewal, feminists within America create many kinds of agency and diverse subjects by embracing changing and contingent subject positions. However, ironically, notes Grewal, that the freedom of choosing one's agency is not innocent of older imperial histories. The newer disciplinary formations in many countries of the world are also derived from their imperial past. Therefore, American neoliberalism paradoxically offers both freedom and restriction to transnational feminists.

In his enlightening essay "Breaking the Boundary: Reading Lahiri's *The Lowland* as a Neo cosmopolitan Fiction" Binod Paudyal argues that it is plausible to study the South Asian diaspora in the United States by reappraising it in the light of that which is "responsive to an age of migration, mobility, and transnational connections" (15). In his bid to study *The Lowland* as neo-cosmopolitan fiction Paudyal resorts to Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma's formulation of the term "neo-cosmopolitanism" in their anthology, *New Cosmopolitanisms: South Asians in the US*.

Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma distinguish between traditional diasporas and the new cosmopolitanism by stating that the latter "results from the confluence of globalization (race, migration, media, money, and culture)..." (2). The critics opine that new cosmopolitan subjects are not confined to a particular nation-state or class. Such subjects "instead [occupy] a range of fluid subject positions, which can be trans-class, trans-local with competing value systems" (ibid). While the character of Gauri tends to fit easily in the category of new cosmopolitanism, the first section of this article attempts to find out her occasional reversion to the past that she otherwise tries to avert habitually. In order to do so, it is imperative to discuss briefly how postcolonial feminism can be related to concepts such as transnational feminism and neo-cosmopolitanism.

Modern postcolonial studies focus on transnational aspects of globalization to find out how earlier postcolonial thoughts have transformed into transnationalism. In the introduction to her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* Ania Loomba comments that postcolonialism now faces new challenges raised by globalization, the increased threats on environment and recent symptoms of global economic crises. The author illustrates her point by noting that globalization does not heavily depend on the center-margin discourse of postcolonial studies; rather its locus is the porosity of geographical borders and transnational networks. While these themes were familiar to the postcolonial critics in the past, they have been thinking in a different form lately. However, holds Loomba, any study on globalization has to "incorporate some of the key insights of postcolonial studies, especially its historical awareness of past forms of empire and the structural connections between colonialism and neo-colonialism" (16). In fact, postcolonial discourse is now being interspersed with transnational issues such as the "inequities" that exist among global "economy, politics, and culture" (ibid). Loomba's arguments that postcolonialism is now intermingled with transnational issues can also be found in Arif Dirlik's essay "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism". Dirlik opines that the differences between the First and Third Worlds are now intermingled, and so the binary oppositions between the First and Third Worlds should now be reconsidered. Dirlik observes that the postcolonial subject also now has a kind of "hybridness" or "in-betweenness" "that is not to be contained within fixed categories or binary oppositions" (336).

Both Loomba and Dirlik argue that in today's world both the term 'postcolonialism' and 'postcolonial subjectivity' have become transnational and fluid. As a postcolonial subject, Gauri's character can be analyzed in the light of postcolonial feminism linked with transnational feminist issues. In the following section Gauri's identity formation is traced within the framework of postcolonial feminist theory.

Gauri Mitra is one of the major characters of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. She travels from India to the United States with her brother-in-law turned second husband. She was first married to Udayan, the younger of two brothers and a Naxalite. After he was killed by the police the elder brother Subhash marries the pregnant Gauri and takes her to Rhode Island. When in Calcutta, in her unmarried days, Gauri had been living an independent life. Separated from her parents at an early age, she and her brother Manash had lived in their grandfather's house in Calcutta while their parents lived in a rural area. When she was sixteen, her parents had died in a car accident. Lahiri makes Gauri into a person who did not have a strong bonding with anyone until she fell in love with Udayan. When this bonding is severed after Udayan's death, Gauri fails to connect with anyone else afterwards, including with her daughter Bela. Therefore, it is noteworthy that from the beginning Lahiri depicts Gauri as an emotionally aloof and withdrawn person.

Although Gauri renounces her traditional role as a wife and a mother by leaving behind her husband and daughter to pursue the role of an independent academic, there are moments when she attempts to reconnect with her past and feels the urge to recuperate the ties she has willingly torn. She avoids getting into contact with her mentor Professor Otto Weiss thinking that he would lose his respect for her if he came to know of her decision of preferring to work rather than raise her child. She always carries during flights the embroidered turquoise shawl that her husband Subhash gave her before their marriage. She has impractically chosen to remain a citizen of her birthplace though she knows that "for the sake of simplifying the end of her life, she would need to become an American" (Lahiri 235). Gauri feels that her job and her individual lifestyle, as well as her need to become an American, are all "a betrayal of everything he [Udayan] had believed in" (Lahiri 234). She feels connected to her past in some external ways because she realizes that

...she remained, in spite of her Western clothes, her Western academic interests, a woman who spoke English with a foreign accent, whose physical appearance and complexion were unchangeable and, against the backdrop of most of America, still unconventional. She continued to introduce herself by an unusual name, the first given by her parents, the last by two brothers she had wed. (Lahiri 236)

Gauri also experiences some racial slights from people who continue to ask her where she had come from. Once a driver sent from the university to pick her up for giving a talk misunderstood her for the person paid to open another person's door. Aspects of her appearance like her complexion as well as her accent connect her to her past but unmistakably internally too; she is irremediably connected to the past from which she has cut herself off deliberately. For example, when on the roof of a hotel she meets an elderly Indian couple taking care of a little boy, suddenly she wants "to align herself with this couple" and tells them that she is waiting to be a grandmother (Lahiri 285). Her coming to Rhode Island to hand over the divorce papers to Subhash is another attempt to reweave the snapped tie between her and Bela. "Ultimately, she had come seeking Bela. She'd come to ask about Bela's life, to ask Subhash if she might contact her now" (Lahiri 306). It is interesting to note that after being renounced by Bela, Gauri chooses to go to Calcutta and attempts suicide at a local hotel, though she restrains herself at the last moment from doing so.



Since this article interprets postcolonialism as a diasporic person's nostalgia and bonding to her past, it is possible to say in this context that Gauri, an apparently assimilated diasporic woman, retains some ties to her past. Her identity cannot be fully explained without a study of this connection that she consciously or unconsciously maintains with her past. Since Gauri is a "translated" person in the sense that her acculturation in the host country is something she has opted for, her identity can be best explained as an example of a version of "postcolonial cosmopolitanisms" as defined by Inderpal Grewal. Postcolonial cosmopolitanism makes a subject transnational in the sense that she, instead of feeling obligated to a single nation, feels connected to the whole universe. However, she cannot fully ignore her ties with her own nation and culture.

In her book Grewal defines three types of identities diasporic people may possess in the age of "transnational connectivities" (36). By transnational connectivities Grewal indicates the flows of goods, capital, labour, and knowledges that reveal "continuities and discontinuities with older colonial formations" (ibid). Grewal defines three distinct, yet overlapping categories of identity formation in the following words:

The first was the discourse of the universal or global subject; the second, that of the national or local subject as separate and distinct and different; and the third, the hyphenated, hybrid subject straddling the first two formations. (36)

Gauri's identity represents the third category mentioned in Grewal's categorization. She notes that people of this category possess an identity that is sometimes resistant to the nation-state and sometimes assimilable to it. She is conscious of the fact that her living and working in the capitalist United States go against Udayan's ideals for which he sacrificed his life. Perhaps her retaining Indian nationality is one way of redeeming herself. However, she is assimilated to the host culture in a number of ways.

Gauri's utilization of the internet to search about Bela and the Naxalbari movement is an example of "transnational connectivities" that enable people like her to hold multiple nationalisms and identities "as well as to shift from one to the other" (Grewal 37). Grewal maintains that these connectivities make it possible for diasporic subjects to assimilate race, gender, class, caste, and nationalisms "to create some divergent versions of postcolonial cosmopolitanisms" (ibid).

In *The Lowland* Gauri Mitra preserves multiple subject positions from the very beginning of her appearance in the narrative. She is born outside Calcutta, but lives there with her extended family. Therefore, she is both an insider and outsider in her grandparents' house. From a devoted student of Philosophy at Presidency she becomes the doting wife of Udayan and a docile daughter-in-law in the Mitra house. After being widowed she marries for the second time to become the wife of her brother-in-law Subhash. Giving birth to Bela makes her a mother but she soon rejects this role by again devoting herself to study. Ultimately her study empowers her to live on her own, disowning the roles of a wife and a mother. The roles of capable professional and brilliant academic that she becomes mark yet another transformation for Gauri. Lesbianism opens up a new dimension of her identity, while coming back to Bela reveals another surprising turn in her development. All these multiple, often contradictory roles that she plays are construed within the theoretical framework of postmodern feminism in the next portion of this article.

One of the major characters in *The Lowland*, Gauri Mitra displays a number of identity traits that conform to some features of postmodern female identity formation as upheld by some theorists. Among them Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan explore the issues of postmodern feminism and globalization in their book *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity*

and *Transnational Feminist Practices*. By the phrase "scattered hegemonies" Grewal describes subjects that are produced as a result of mobile capital, transnational culture, and multiple subjectivities that replace the notion of a unitary subject. Her book makes us realize that postmodern subjects are not separable from the questions of race, transnational culture, and global economy. These aspects form the agency of postmodern subjectivity in a transnational world that is conducive to a fragmented or scattered state of being for its postmodern subjects.

The argument presented by Grewal and Kaplan can also be found in other critics. Among them Gayatri Gopinath is relevant in the context of the present discussion. In the essay "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexuality in Motion" Gopinath suggests how an important body of feminist criticisms engages itself with the compliance of nationalist discourse with gender hierarchies. These feminist critics reveal how women are enshrined as both "the symbolic center and boundary marker of the nation" in the nationalistic discourse of different cultures (Gopinath 262). Gopinath observes that whereas many critical works have been formulated on the analysis of women's emblematic performance as homemakers of a nation, "much less attention has been paid to the production and deployment of non-heteronormative, or "queer," sexuality within colonial, anti-colonial nationalist, and contemporary nationalist discourses" (263). Gopinath holds that heterosexuality of the female subject is presumed as normative in discourses of nationalism and women's sexuality. Therefore, within the familial and domestic space of the nation as imagined community, "non-heteronormative sexuality is either criminalized, or disavowed and elided:" (ibid).

The pivotal character of Gauri Mitra in *The Lowland* reverses a number of traditional gender roles from the beginning of her appearance in the narrative that culminates in her sexual overtures with Lorna, a researcher under her supervision. Gauri's switching of gender roles after coming to Rhode Island as Subhash's wife began with her withdrawing herself to the bedroom when Subhash was preparing their meals. It continued even after the birth of her daughter Bela, whom she often left home alone for taking walks. Gauri's refusal to conform to the role of a wife and mother climaxes with her leaving the house to take up a teaching job at California during one of Bela and Subhas's trip to India. In such actions Gauri reveals tracts of a postmodern feminist subject located in a transnational space. About her position as a diasporic queer South Asian, Gopinath notes that such a subject "occupies a place of impossibility, in that not only is she excluded from these various "home" spaces but, quite literally, she simply cannot be imagined" (265).

Gopinath's words resound those of the postmodern feminist critics Judith Butler and Adrienne Rich, when these critics discuss the question of lesbianism in two of their seminal works. Butler in *Gender Trouble* notes that transsexual subjects appear to be invisible in certain cultures since political and cultural laws in those societies establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality. Butler notes that "[i]ndeed, precisely because certain kinds of 'gender identities' fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain" (24). In her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" Rich also talks about the nonexistence of queer females by observing that lesbians have always been denied of a political existence in history. They have been considered "as female versions of male homosexuality" (Rich 28). Thus female reality is erased by the inclusion of lesbianism in male homosexuality. All the critics agree on the proposition that lesbianism has always been excluded and hidden from the political, cultural, and legal framework of different societies. Judged from their perspective, the case of Gauri Mitra of *The Lowland*

can be thought of as inhabiting a secluded place in the social hierarchy where she can keep her sexual identity hidden. It is mentioned in the text that she is aware of the fact that “[i]t would have been a scandal if anyone detected what was going on” (Lahiri 241).

Gauri compares the reversion of her role from lover to colleague of Lorna with the other changes of roles she has willingly brought over herself. She summarizes these upheavals of her life in these words:

It was not unlike the way her role had changed at so many other points in the past. From wife to widow, from sister-in-law to wife, from mother to childless woman...She had generated alternative versions of herself, she had insisted at brutal cost on these conversions. Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end. (Lahiri 240)

This self-realization on Gauri's part enables her to recognize the various roles she has performed in life. These somewhat contradictory roles indicate her fragmented existence that is characteristic of postmodern identity formation. Along with this fragmented self, the queer identity of Gauri makes her isolated at one point. Butler and Rich, as well as Gopinath, had noted that a queer woman is nonexistent in the society, likewise, Gauri conforms to the social norm by choosing to hide her identity. Ironically, as a result of the reversal of her normative gender role, she is secluded and lonely in the end. As a true postmodern subject Gauri possesses multiple, and even an unstable identity that is marked by mutable gender and societal roles. By going back to Grewal and Kaplan, we can situate Gauri's subject position in the transnational context as opposed to that of “the European unitary subject” (7). Grewal and Kaplan view postmodernism as a political discourse that forms a significant part of transnational culture. In Grewal's words mobile capitals and multiple subjectivities produce “scattered hegemonies” and postmodernism is the cultural expression of this term. Viewed thus, the postmodern diasporic subject Gauri is part of this scattered hegemony whose identity is marked by multiplicity and instability.

The last section of the article studies Gauri Mitra's identity formation as a diasporic woman in the United States who re-visions Lahiri's usual depiction of first-generation South Asian female characters who accommodate tradition and modernity. Unlike Ashima Ganguli in Lahiri's much discussed first novel *The Namesake*, Gauri deconstructs the idea of a diasporic Indian family in order to live an individual life in a separate state as a devoted careerist and academic woman. Her forsaking of Subhash and Bela is something that turns the idea of a close-knit family upside down. This shocking decision deconstructs the traditional idea of a first-generation diasporic South Asian woman's identity and signals a new era of cosmopolitanism. The complex identity formation of Gauri makes her a new diasporic Indian woman in the United States.

The story of Gauri's arrival in the United States after her postgraduate student husband has settled down there is different from most of other homesick housewives from India. After attending a party with other Indians at Narasimhan's place, a senior of Subhash in the same university, Gauri declares that she has nothing in common with the other expatriate Indian women and so does not want to keep in touch with them anymore. Shortly after the party she cuts off her hair and destroys her Indian outfits and replaces them with Western ones such as slacks and sweater. In fact, Gauri's outward transformation signals a deeper divide in her that keeps her apart of the typical diasporic women from her own country. Her extraordinary childhood of freedom and a life spent apart from her family teaches her to be aloof and makes her introverted from the very beginning. The only possibility of her change of disposition died with Udayan as she cocooned herself even more firmly after his death. Therefore, diasporic life does not imply

nostalgia and homesickness for Gauri; neither does it bring the blessing of a new life for her. The void inside her is too deep to be touched or fulfilled. It has been there even before she met Udayan. Gauri is a person who is always already alone, and unable to connect with the others around her. This is something Subhash's mother predicts correctly about her by noting that: "[s]he's too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother" (Lahiri114).

Both Gauri's inner and outer selves find comfort in an existence that does not require intimacy of any kind. She can bear to remain on the edge of community life, letting its bustle graze her only enough to feel herself professionally needed. She believes that with her life in California she had entered a new world. This life allows her to form temporary relationships with students and colleagues, relationships that never strike their root deep and never claim a part of her soul. She engages in sporadic love relations, sometimes more than one at the same time, but always remains impersonal about them, taking them as passing matters. In such an existence Gauri feels that if she wished she could be virtually connected to anyone or anything without getting closer. She also feels that her virtual presence on the internet is something inevitable: "[s]he cannot avoid it; she is a member of the virtual world, an aspect of her visible on the new sea that has come to dominate the earth's surface" (Lahiri 276). Gauri's sense of her new self indicates the emergence of a new kind of diasporic subject who is, in Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma's words, a "new cosmopolitan" who "occupies a range of fluid subject positions, which can be trans-class, trans-local with competing value systems" (2).

In the essay "Breaking the Boundary: Reading Lahiri's *The Lowland* as a Neo-cosmopolitan Fiction" Binod Paudyal observes that "Gauri represents a new cosmopolitan subject of the twenty-first century, the new millennium characterized by global capitalism and global forms of travel, technology, and communication" (28). She problematizes the traditional categories of home and belonging because her willingly chosen subject position is fluid. She "stays home in California, but she is a moving diaspora, positioning herself between multiple places, particularly through the virtual world" (ibid). Paudyal's study of Gauri's character is based on the concept of cosmopolitan subject formation characterized by a host of critics, some of whom have been made use of in the context of the present article to reinforce the identity of Gauri as a redefined new woman of contemporary South Asian diaspora in the United States.

A relevant point to be considered regarding Gauri's identity is to see how her subject position empowers her in diasporic space. It is obvious that her academic achievements and subsequent professional success are directly connected to her migration to, and stay in America. However, given her temperament, it can be conjectured that she would not be able to continue performing the role of a docile housewife anywhere in the world. Again, her innate sense of isolation would not allow her to be spiritually connected to anyone around her. In this sense, Gauri seems to be a migrant bound to live a dissociated life, not only in a geographical sense, but also in the psychological sense. The United States provides her with the opportunity to respond to the urge for dispersal that is already within her. She is merely externalizing her internal mobility as a diasporic subject. However, it is also important to note that the United States has created a space for her where she can cater to the country's requirement. Seen from this viewpoint, Gauri's diasporic existence seems to be an effect of both personal effort and external stimulations. Therefore, the tag "neo-cosmopolitan" is appropriate for her because Rajan and Sharma invest this term with transnational movements caused by both personal and external motivations. The personal and external motivations that stimulate Gauri's transnational movement depend on the use of technology to a great extent. Thus it is also possible to

include Arjun Appadurai's idea of "ethnoscape and technoscape" within Rajan and Sharma's concept of neo-cosmopolitanism to theorize the lived experience of Gauri Mitra.

Appadurai uses the term "ethnoscape" to define the consciousness of mobile persons who have had a notable effect on the global politics. He holds that these people "can never afford to let their imagination rest too long, even if they wish to" (Appadurai 32). He believes that behind diasporic people's movement factors like the shifting needs of international capital and shifting policies on refugee populations play a big role. As for technoscape, the critic observes that now both mechanical and informational technology moves at a high speed "across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries" (Appadurai 32). Gauri's life in California is informed by ideas that Appadurai has drawn since her lived experience as a diasporic subject is inspired by the kind of ethno- and technoscapes he has talked about. The first scape allows her existence as a moving subject, as an Indian academic in the USA, whereas the second one enables her to straddle boundaries in the reality of a virtual world.

So far in this article the identity formation of Gauri Mitra has been analyzed from three different perspectives. Finally, it can be conjectured that Gauri straddles identities in the sense that both geographically and psychologically she occupies multiple places, cultures, and subject positions. Thus she embodies the concept of transnational feminism that enables her in the United States to create many kinds of agency and diverse subjects by embracing changing and contingent subject positions. As a diasporic woman she can be viewed as a new cosmopolitan subject who is not confined to a particular nation-state or class. Therefore, it can be justifiably said that Gauri represents the concept of an unconventional femininity through the reversal of the role of a wife and a mother, and by embracing the role of an individual devoted to academic pursuits and personal achievements.

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# Challenging Brahminical Patriarchy: The Poetry of Meena Kandasamy and Usha Akella

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the critique of Brahminical patriarchy in the radical poetry of Meena Kandasamy and Usha Akella. While both poets, one Dalit and the other Brahmin, represent polar nodes of the caste spectrum, their poems delve into the intersections of women's lives and examine the layers of oppression that women negotiate. In addressing gender-caste violence and the othering as a result of privilege, Kandasamy's and Akella's poetry offers us opportunities for a deeper critique and dialogue.

*Keywords:* Dalit, Brahmin, Patriarchy, Poetry, Feminism

As much as Meena Kandasamy and Usha Akella are from different caste demarcations, Brahmin and Dalit, one privileged, the other oppressed by upper castes, particularly Brahmins, what draws them together is their honest gaze at and articulation of caste dominance and the oppression of women. However, the comparison is complicated. In her poetry, Kandasamy addresses the caste oppression suffered by Dalits. Many of her poems are indictments against Gandhi, Brahmin supremacy, Hindu practices, as well as the celebration of leaders such as Dr. Ambedkar. Akella's poetry is critical of her caste privilege that she as a woman is oppressed by. In her feminist poems, she lays out the crude details of the expectations of and assumptions about women that circumscribe her both as woman and as seeker. At the outset I would like to state that I am cognizant of the difference between gender violence of non-Dalit women and the gender-caste violence of Dalit women. In this essay, I want to show how Kandasamy portrays gender-caste violence and how Akella portrays gender violence within caste privilege. How do both poets address the othering of the self? In Akella's poems, we are conscious of patriarchy's *modus operandi* in the othering of the self. In describing the layers of patriarchal and caste oppression, Kandasamy "underscores the inseparability of caste and gender identities" (Rege 134). Both poets don't see "struggles categorized as singular issues," but as "complexities of compoundedness;" their poems show the problems of "reinforce[ing] the status quo" (Crenshaw 148).

Kandasamy ridicules Brahmin caste habits and describes the fatal results of caste supremacy and beliefs that keep the caste system in place. Consider Kandasamy's clever mirroring of the form to capture the irony of Advaita (Non-Dualism) philosophy, in "Advaita: The Ultimate Question":

"Non Dualism  
Atman Self  
Brahman God  
Are Equal  
And Same.  
So I  
Untouchable Outcast

Am God.  
Will You  
Ever Agree?

...

Can My  
Untouchable Atman  
And Your  
Brahmin Atman  
Ever Be  
One

?" (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*, lines 1-10; 18-24).

This poem begins with the line "Nondualism" and enacts the opposite: the poem splits in two, with two words per line. Kandasamy presents the cruel and violent actions of Hindus as diametrically opposite to the philosophical idea of Advaita. The average Hindu self, here the Brahmin self, is split from the Atman; thus they are split from Brahman (Highest being). If, according to Advaita philosophy, the Dalit is also "god," since the speaker is part of the universal Atman, ironically, the Hindu is further split from Advaita and from the highest selfhood by not recognizing the Dalit as a sacred part of Atman. The poem reaches its final argumentative crescendo by asking the provocative question, if it is even imaginable that the Dalit soul and the Brahmin soul can be one. It is a rhetorical question that contains its own answer, No, with a resounding finality, which the question mark that occupies its own line seems to affirm. Similar to other Dalit writers, Kandasamy exposes the irony of caste that is a cancer in religion. In "Prayers," which describes the beating of a Dalit man in a temple by an upper caste man, she calls out the hypocrisy of devotees: "Caste—crueler than disease, emotionless, dry, took its toll confirming traditional truths: Dalits die, due to devotion" (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*, lines 22-23). In the final line of the poem, she relegates the gods to hell, for where else can they reside if an innocent man is murdered and his soul sent to hell?

Akella's critique of Brahminism is highlighted in "From a Brahmin Niyogi Woman to a White Woman," in which she lists all the things a "good woman" does to meet the expectations set by patriarchy. But the breaking point is clear: "I didn't fully come apart / somehow there is enough glue / And yet I rue, I rue." The voice of a woman trapped within caste dictates haunts us. That she stays "within glass walls / where duty and goodness call / tipsy on dharma resisting booze / watching / watching as they crack and break" lists the process of the shattering and the layers of delusion (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 24-26; 79-83). In "Requiem," Akella talks more about the process of the Brahmin woman breaking with caste and patriarchy: "I danced through my lineage, the coils of DNA / and their heavy bearing, I danced beyond being Indian, / Brahmin, immigrant or outsider, / the raiments of identity, color of skin or lens" (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 92-95). These poems show the double-edged sword of caste patriarchy; it oppresses those within and without hegemonic structures.

What in Kandasamy is a painful splitting of self and other, in Akella becomes the desire to connect outside of herself and be at home everywhere; hence, her travel to many parts of the world and be with many people of different faiths. Of course, she has the socio-economic privilege to travel, but the poems affirm the oneness of humanity, as she pays attention to the immanent presence of the other wherever she travels. This presence of the fragmented other is also the goddess, "pointing *mehendi* stained palms inward" (Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes*, "Dakshineswar IV" 15)—as we see in the "Dakshineswar"

series, Kali poems, and Guadalupe. The Word is embodied in the cries of "'Maajaago' pounding the air, / As if the earth is a drum beating to your awakening" (Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes* 9-10).

In the Dalit tradition of dissent, Kandasamy debunks Hinduism. She critiques the mythological stories which are replete with oppression of the Shudra, the lowest caste. For example, in her poem "Ekalaivan" she hurls a missile at "fascist" Dronacharya unable to bear the "crime" of a young boy aspiring to be a better archer than the teacher's brilliant student, Arjuna. The poet writes to Ekalaivan a consolatory note: "You don't need your right thumb,/To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb" (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*, lines 7-8). In this example of the poet offering agency, she asserts that there is plenty in her arsenal to push back against the terrorizing upper castes. Reading this poem, readers become aware of mythological stories of divine characters (supremely good) terrorizing Dalit characters (demons). These stories have been part of the cultural fabric and it takes the oppressed to bring to light this terrible divinely-sanctioned injustice, and for society to use its critical lens to awaken to a shared cultural knowledge of injustice. Kandasamy is allowing us to bear witness to the age-old narratives and ask questions about Hindu philosophy: Brahmin belief in "purity," vegetarianism, man-made taboos against menstruation, and religious restrictions. Does contemporary Indian society venture to see the counter cultural movements within Hinduism, its lesser-known branches, both in religious practice and philosophies? This question is answered in Akella's poetry, which can be placed in the tradition of anti-caste spiritual traditions, such as Bhakti movement, tantric practices, and Buddhism.

Akella is shaped by Hindu philosophy, religion, culture and customs. But she is also shaped by her feminism, and her discovery of her voice once she immigrates to the United States. "No longer was her identity tied to caste, religion, in-laws, or 'Indian wife'. Usha became a poet. Her poems celebrate this new-found freedom to speak—and to see the world anew" (Starling). In the process of her growth as a poet, she writes about other women, other cultures, and examines her oppression and finds amity with counter cultural spiritual practices on the margins of Hinduism. Her training under a Sufi master results in her oeuvre of Sufi poems. When we go deeper into her work, especially in *A Face that does not see the footprints of the World*, we see her connect with a vital nerve of the mystical path which bypasses the dogma and division within Hindu history and practice.

Autobiography and poetry have the kind of analysis that is the baseline for poetic articulation. As Rege asserts, "Dalit women's testimonies offered counter narratives that challenged the selective memory and univocal history both of the Dalit and the women's movements (134). Kandasamy writes autobiographical poems about the fate of other Dalit women. She uses the autobiographical "I" to write in the voices of Dalit women, thus giving them agency. "First person narratives [here, poems] clearly play a role in expanding the canvas of feminist thought—particularly demonstrating how the challenges posed by caste identity reveal the absence of homogeneity among women—that women are different (Mahadevan 227). When Kandasamy offers us in "Apologies for Living On" a portrait of the humiliations suffered by herself and other women—"I was a helpless girl /against the brutal world of / bottom-patting-and-breast-pinching" (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*, lines 7-9)—she is showing the possibility of female experience that "has meaning for both non-Dalits and Dalits, as well in the search for transformatory practices leading to an egalitarian social world (Mahadevan 227). The title speaks to women's agency in the face of brutal obstacles.



Some of Akella's poems are autobiographical, where she reveals the self that shares with other voices of women. Deeply aware of the patriarchal order, where the purity of caste is maintained by controlling the Brahmin woman's reproduction through endogamy, Akella writes, "Sir, no Sir, I will not give you sons, / I will abort every male fetus I bear (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, "I Will Not Bear You Sons," lines 12-13). In these lines, we hear the militant tone of Kandasamy's poems. When Akella uses the "I," she invites other women to see themselves in the characters who are given voice. We hear the voices of millions of women who are burdened with the pressure to bear sons. Such is the misogyny that Akella's poem exposes. In battling evils in the structures of sexism and casteism, Kandasamy and Akella allow their audience to see themselves in the poem's mirror.

Both poets write without apology or censorship about the brutality of the walls that keep them out or which confine them. Rebellion is a running theme. What is the nature of their rebellion? In Kandasamy, we see it in her strident tone, in the strategies she employs in her poetry that mirror the arguments and counter-arguments happening in real time, as she personally experiences them and bears witnesses to the narratives of her community. In "How to Make the Bitch Give up Beef," we hear and see the on-the-ground violence of upper castes towards Dalits and non-Dalits who are beef-eaters. As the epigraph indicates, the poem is based on the real life "strategies employed against the poet after her defence of the organizers of the 2012 Hyderabad Beef Festival and her condemnation of the subsequent violence" (Kandasamy, *This Poem Will Provoke You*). While the poem is sarcastic and witty, we hear the fanaticism of terrorist politicians and social media tweets when it comes to vegetarianism, as portrayed in the strategies that are used, from threatening social messaging to planned attacks. Kandasamy uses these same strategies in her poetic form, whereby the poem is divided into sections of action plans; this fiery mix brings us face to face with the harassment faced by dissenting women, particularly Dalit women and Dalit activists and writers in India. The poem ends with the cold threat of a gang rape tweeted to her; the irony cannot be missed: "explore the possibilities of an Islamic-style Hindu fatwa to finish the bitch once and for all" (Kandasamy, *This Poem Will Provoke You*, "How To Make the Bitch give up Beef," lines 53-55).

Contrary to the false assumptions of Dalits as lacking a spiritual tradition, as propagated by Hindu nationalists, Dalit-authored critical works show that "Dalit spirituality is the origin of non-violence" (Raj). It is ironic that the upper castes who revere vegetarianism are violent toward Dalits! Just as Dalit women leaders have been spearheading justice movements—as we see in some Christian Dalits who call for "courageous compassion" and harmony (Bernard 49-50)—Kandasamy uses poetry as social activism to awaken non-Dalits from complacency to witness truths that have lain veiled.

Like Kandasamy, Akella prods the national consciousness to look deeper at our failed humanity. Some of Akella's poems are about specific oppressions women face currently. In "Naming," Akella writes about the national protest following Jyoti Singh's rape in 2012. The victim was called Nirbhaya, since her name was not released. The poem begins with an epigraph, a statement by Jyoti's father who says her name should be on everyone's lips, so other women do not experience the same violence that his daughter experienced. Akella's fine lines connect images of the mother's pain that fuel activism, thus drawing us into the center of the protest:

Her mother's eyes were dark charcoal, unspilled lakes,  
She died but we die every day...Kudrat bhi ne hamare saath nahin diya<sup>1</sup>

When the dots finally connected they were black,  
 black gags, gnashes across their mouths, black dressed,  
 the women gathered in India Gate, Raisina Hill,  
 the drum beat of marching footsteps in cities spelt *Justice*...

women as petroleum, she the wick  
 keeping the flame burning. (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 11-18)

The refrain of “black,” the visual image of the sorrow in the mother’s eyes, and the metaphor of women as the fuel to keep the memory of the victim alive make us aware that we too are bearing witness to a crime against women. Akella feels the responsibility as a poet to write about violence done to women, a violence that is out of control as class, caste and gender inequalities widen, making the lives of many ever more precarious. Violence of men against women is a dominant subject in Akella’s poems. But she goes a step further in “I will not Bear you sons” to point out the hypocrisy of women who have internalized patriarchy:

“For all those half-souled women turning on each other,  
 rich with epithets for men behind their backs,  
 who point to their head and say, ‘I hate him,’  
 and points to their hearts and say, ‘I love him,’  
 and walk around dismembered holding their  
 head in one hand and heart in another” (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 140-45).

This split in women shows a deep internal colonization of the self—masking truths as a result of fear of expulsion from family and society.

Rather than remain in fear or subjugation, the poet aggressively asserts at the end of the poem,

“I will have girl children,  
 I will write my poems wet with vein-blood,  
 they will come to me,  
 daughters dead by female infanticide,  
 daughters dead by dowry deaths,  
 daughters mutilated by female genital mutilation,  
 daughters slicing their wrists,  
 daughters anemic, anorexic, stunted into size 0s,  
 they will come to this womb, this glorious womb,  
 these are the ones that I will bear” (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 168-77).

Fully armed with her female Shakti power, she looks closely at the lives of women and finds that power in the most traumatized. As she writes in a short prose poem, “Witness,” “Every room a record—who we are, who we were what we did, what we tried to be . . . What we became is the wall’s silent secret (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 1-3).

Kandasamy shocks us as she captures in vivid detail the double oppression of caste and gender that Dalit women endure. She talks openly about sexual expression and about sexual oppression. Her poems show that she has clearly stormed the gates that were locked to Dalits and women and poured out her rage in radical verses. Her women in *Ms. Militancy* “do not confine themselves within the iron bars of culture and tradition” (Priya 2). Their role models are Kannagi of the *Cilapathikaram* whose rage burns down the city and Sita who become expert in her walkouts from the strictures of the King/husband. Sexual language permeates her depictions of religious icons as well as the celebration of “the fires of a woman hungry for sex” (Kandasamy, *This Poem Will Provoke*

*You*, lines 22-23) and “prides [herself] in [her] perverse mindset” (31), a fury that makes her declare, “This poem is pornographic” (86) and she will not apologize for it. Kandasamy’s depiction of male violence against women is brilliant in its detail in her novel, *When I Hit You*. My contention is that we cannot separate intimate partner violence from the violence that emerges from stratified social structure of caste, which underlines Kandasamy’s poetry. Therefore, reading Kandasamy’s work gives us a deeper insight into domestic violence. Both upper castes and men within relationships are wanting to see the woman without an identity, as an absence. The wife in her novel says, “I should be a blank. With anything that reflects my personality cleared out. . . . This is plainness that makes him pleased. . . this plainness that will prevent arguments” (Kandasamy, *When I Hit You*).

While Akella addresses the heart of the violence that undoes us as humans, she also looks for the conditions that restore our humanity. “The Face that does not bear the footprints of the World” is about the speaker’s knowledge of the nearness of the beloved. “Do not think that I do not see how you look at me” (Akella, *A Face that does Not Bear the Footprints of the World* 15); after images of the face are touched by the seeker’s love, it loosens in the end. The Sufi poems are the seeker’s journey until the beloved’s recognition of the seeker, which is the climax of mystical poetry. Akella’s spiritual introspection leads her to ask existential questions, such as the refrain “Why to live” in the eponymous poem, punctuating a variety of experiences: “[When] the mind like a womb ruptured / with too much onslaught of Samsara / and the heart has trembled on so many nameless / portals of terror...” (Akella, *A Face that Does not Bear the Footprints of the World* 51). Akella’s exploration of her mystical path leads us to the nerve center of spiritual oneness and connection with the other, a supernatural energy, a human being, or nature. She steps across faiths in her spiritual journey, across ethnic, racial and caste lines, for these make no sense to her mystic quest.

While she witnesses the stratified spaces we live in, and her poetry is powered with fury which makes her declaim in “Moon-Gazing Bird,” “Rage has no caste” (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, line 1), her quest leads her beyond divisions, beyond the experiences of rage, fear, loneliness, violence, and hurt, where love exists, the love that is possible for us to experience with each other. The inner journey is reflected in the outer, in the desire to show the oppression and feel with the other, however different or violent the other’s experience. From the ferocity that informs Kandasamy’s work, we can guess that she will disagree with Akella that “rage has no caste,” because her rage stems from the wounds of caste oppression, and the balm has to come from a total wiping out of the caste system, which entails upper castes letting go of much of their caste-imprinted scriptures, belief system, customs, and practices.

In her critique of a popular Netflix show, “Indian Matchmaking,” Thenmozhi Soundararajan says that women hold up the oppressive caste system. Brahmin patriarchy controls women’s sexuality by controlling upper caste women’s birth canal which keeps the upper caste patriarchal lineage intact (Soundararajan “Caste and Colorism”). Dalit and non-Dalit feminist activists begin their analysis of social issues with the Ambedkarite premise that endogamy was the key to the continuity of the caste system.

“Just like it does not take a man to practice misogyny, it is not necessarily Brahmins who practice brahminism” (Arya 8). Brahmin patriarchy is practiced across castes and faiths. Kandasamy is attacking it at its root. In “Becoming a Brahmin,” Kandasamy lampoons the impossibility of Gandhi’s suggestion of the “algorithm” to end casteism. The poem enacts the algorithm, with the lines written in computer code. The idea that a Shudra woman can become a Brahmin by marrying a Brahmin and producing Brahmin

children thereby populating the country with Brahmins has the coldness of Mendelian eugenics which was practiced by the Nazis to produce a purely Aryan population. We hear the steely ring of ethnocide, further augmented by the dark humor of the final lines apologizing for the inconvenience of the wait, written in the tone of an infomercial or automatic phone message heard when there is a telephone connection glitch (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*). Disgusted by the cancer of caste, Dr. Ambedkar renounces Hinduism. In his riposte to Gandhi's emphasis on the "toleration and catholicity" of Hinduism, Dr. Ambedkar calls such "virtues" "indifference or flaccid latitudinarianism" (Ambedkar 345). He points out Gandhi's wishy-washy stance on caste. As many Dalits assert, Gandhi merely changed the name of the "untouchable" caste to "harijan" but did not denounce caste as detrimental to Hinduism and to the nation: "You dubbed us pariahs—'Harijans'/ goody-goody guys of a bigot god / Ram Ram Hey Ram—boo" (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*, lines 10-12), Kandasamy skewers Gandhi in "Mohandas Karamchand". Keeping the caste system alive defeats the fight against British oppression. She questions concepts like Dharma and Karma which are cultural currency: She attacks, in "Justice Is," the messenger, Dharma, as "a bastard,/an illegitimate son./ Justice is Dharma./ Dharma is a bastard" (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*, lines 30-33). By her logic, if justice itself is illegitimate, what hope do Dalits have?

Does Kandasamy elide over the possibilities for healing when she denounces what many non-Dalits revere: Gandhi, dharma, karma, the stories in mythology? Besides the denunciation of Brahminical patriarchy and its terrible harm to Dalits, is Kandasamy able to offer a redeeming space in the relationship between people of different castes? Is Akella able to offer a ray of hope in her challenge to Brahminical patriarchy? What possibilities for amity does Akella offer?

Both poets veer toward the goddesses as they turn the tattered pages of the history of religion in India. Dravidian goddesses were transformed after the Aryan invasion. The goddesses were married to the Aryan gods, but some of the goddesses who escaped marriage continued to be worshipped as single goddesses in the many towns of the South. In "Mariamman," the speaker is worried that her goddess Mari is joining the Brahmin gang and leaving the Dalits. Kandasamy asks if the goddesses believe "our poverty would soil their hearts and our labor corrupt their souls" and therefore cannot bear to be touched by Dalits (Kandasamy, *Poem Hunter*, "Maariamman," lines 8-9). The speaker voices the spirituality of Dalits who believe that only Mariamman is touched by their troubles. Because of the behaviors of the priests of the temple, Dalits can't take shelter in the knowledge that goddesses are above the patriarchal fray; they enact Brahminical patriarchy, by not leading the Goddess procession to the streets where Dalits live owing to their concern about being polluted. The enraged speaker attacks the shortsightedness of the priests who have made goddesses to mirror good-girl-vegetarian Brahmin women. She deliberately lists the offering that Dalits make to Mari—roosters and goats—to make sure her Mari does not go off to join the enemy. Ironically, upper castes pray to Mariamman when they have a health crisis. A greater irony is that they don't turn to her to heal their disease of casteism!

Since we see the marginalized goddesses inhabit both Kandasamy and Akella's poems, perhaps their effort to bring them into the center of socio-cultural practices, the fine arts, and writing can bring about the dissolution of Brahminical patriarchy. Mainstream Hinduism is male-centered and relegates goddess-centered practices as esoteric, while these esoteric practices are deeply feminine and see men, women and nature as interbeing. Akella's poems explore the two sides of women's stories, the marginalization as well as

the inner power that fights to survive. In this her book *Rosary of Latitudes* explores various cultures replete with feminist spirituality. One example is the Nahuatl Guadalupe. In "The Basilica of Guadalupe," she weaves together the praise of the Virgin from the indigenous languages, which lend a unique melody to the lines, as in "The coyoli jingle" and "fill the cape of your heart with Cozcamiauh" (Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes*13). Even if she does not write about Dalit struggle per se, Akella's poetry reflects her awareness of human sensitivity to pain and our potential to cause pain. She writes in "Poems I Can't Write," "We hurt and are hurt, each step leaves a claw mark / on the sand, because no pain is fully human, guttural, it belongs to the / subterranean... ask Mary when she lost her son" (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 26-28). How do we show up in the world? How do we embody anti caste? Usha answers these questions in her poems.

That women who have experienced oppression and witness it around them have a responsibility to speak about it is evident in both poets. In Kandasamy's poems, the subaltern speaks and the reader has no choice but to engage. Similarly, in Akella's feminist poetry, she looks unrelentingly at herself—the self, shaped by caste privilege that undermines the feminist female. Writing about the other women and girls, such as in "Song for Gulsoma," she bears witness to violence against children. The haunting repetitions in this poem awaken our conscience to a little girl's plight in the face of cruelty. "What is the color of paradise in your dreams?" (Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes*11) asks the poet. Unable to simply describe the harm done to a little girl, the speaker finds connection with the survivor: "Little girl, little girl, your beautiful smile keeps me warm, / your spirit a mystery. You lived on when they wanted you dead" (11).

Even in an ekphrastic poem, Akella brings reality to light, as in "Woman on the Sand," a sculpture exhibit by Arturo Martini. Ambiguity is the hallmark of this poem: does the woman shield her eyes from the sun or from the suspicion that grows in her as she watches her lover talk to another woman on the beach? Akella ends with the ambiguous note: "or then this may be about a light too hard to bear" (Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes*15-16). In "Recollecting Matisse's Jeanette," Akella reflects on Matisse's sculpture of the female form, and wonders if his "progressive distortion of the female face [is]/ misogyny or self-reflection? / erasure or intuition" (Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes*13-15)? The poem's harsh evaluation of patriarchal power fragmenting women, ends with the poet's personal answer about a different kind of annihilation, a spiritual one, where the individual falls into light, as depicted in *sahasrara*—the visualization of one's Shakti or power. This poem unfolds for us Akella's vision of the numinous that offers a direction away from the suffering of being broken or actively breaking the other.

In goddess practices, there is no separation between woman and goddess, since the goddess is immanent, not transcendent. "Homage to a Kolkota Mother," may be about a human mother or Kali—they are one and the same. Akella experiences her as "light as air in a room, / and as air, let things be" (Akella, *The Rosary of Latitudes*7-8). This feeling about Kali / woman as delicate allows the reader to imagine the spirit as a delicate thing; we sense this intangibility, like gossamer, wrapping her poems.

Our ontological and epistemological understanding of gender / caste / class violence are strengthened in the poets' deft use of language and form to create a whole array of emotions embodied in their visual and aural experiences. While in Kandasamy's work we are led into uncertainty and insecurity of knowing the difficulty of finding anything redeeming in the experiences she describes, in Akella, we are offered the sliver of possibility to restore our belief in humanity, and perhaps this, too, is a privilege, born of security that her caste offers. While it is important to recount the harm done to the Dalit

body, some might expect more nuance than simply militancy and biting cynicism. Akella's poems accomplish the task of being provocative in order to challenge people to react, witness beauty in her imagination, as seen in Akella celebrating Kandasamy's poetry in "Moon-Gazing Bird:" "on new moon nights Meena / the moon's gaze is in your poems" (Akella, *I Will Not Bear You Sons*, lines 7-8). While some of Kandasamy's early poems are imitative of American poets, such as Sylvia Plath (as in "Mohandas Karamchand" imitative of Plath's "Daddy"), we are left after reading her poems, with an emptiness, a blank, as if we are not supposed to expect anything more. And perhaps this is Kandasamy's intent to place the ball in the court of the hegemony to figure out how they want to continue the narrative of violence, what strategies they want to use to stop it. As readers of these two poets, we see the difficult dialogues we need to continue to have to mitigate the violence of patriarchy and caste oppression that reaches into every stratified category of the lives of oppressors, survivors and victims.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Even God was not on our side.

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# Women and Anti-fascist Resistance in India: Personal Documentation in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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**Abstract:** Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) is set in India in the period spanning the 20th century to the first decade of the 21st century. It focuses on many instances of state-induced violence in these times like the Gujarat pogroms in 2002, the violence in Kashmir under Indian occupation, and the aggressive snubbing of Maoists in Andhra Pradesh—instances that influence the lives of the characters in many ways. While there has been considerable hesitation in the popular discourse on labelling Hindutva politics as 'fascist', a host of scholarships acknowledge the legitimacy of the term 'fascism' for Hindu nationalist state politics. Anti-fascist resistance can be taken as a lens for examining protests, organizations, and movements on a large number of issues affected by authoritarian state policies that privileges only certain social groups—casteism, Islamophobia, violence on LGBTQ+ community, and so on. These issues also vary in their nature according to geographical contexts in India. I am concerned in this paper with affective anti-fascist resistance by women on problems concerning hijras and Muslims in Delhi and Gujarat and Maoists in Andhra Pradesh—social and geographical coordinates that are relevant in exploring the personal documents of Anjum and Revathy. The questions I want to explore in this paper are: How do the two women characters, Anjum and Revathy, resist fascist master narratives through affects? In what ways do their personal documents function as counter-narratives in this resistance? Through my paper, I shall contribute to the discourse on anti-fascism in India and its intersections with gender and affect studies.

*Keywords:* Anti-fascist resistance, Women, Affects, Caste, Transgender

## Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is set in India in the period spanning the 20th century to the first decade of the 21st century. It focuses on many instances of state-induced violence in Indian history in these times like the Gujarat pogroms in 2002, the violence in Kashmir under Indian occupation, and the aggressive snubbing of Maoists in Andhra Pradesh—instances that influence the lives of the characters through affects among other ways.

While there has been considerable hesitation in the popular discourse on labelling Hindutva politics as 'fascist', a host of scholarships in the late 20th and 21st centuries acknowledges the legitimacy of the term 'fascism' for Hindu nationalist state politics. Sucheta Mazumdar emphasizes in her article on the similarities between right-wing Hindu politics and German and Italian fascism to establish the justification of calling the former 'fascist'. She says: "The Indian [fascist] movement is deliberately modelled after the

European fascist movements and although much that is deemed 'Western' is rejected by the Indian movement, the Nazis remain figures of admiration in the writings of the main ideologues." (Mazumdar 1) The argument regarding Hindutva's ideological misfit with European fascism, therefore, does not seem to hold much water. Another article, "Hindutva's Foreign tie-up in the 1930s: Archival Evidence" by Marzia Casolari further illustrates Mazumdar's point by establishing that earlier politicians of the RSS had direct contact with Italian fascist leader, Mussolini, and the group was quite taken in by what they perceived to be a transformation of Italy from a disorderly socialist country to an ordered and prosperous nation. So, the founder of RSS, K.B. Hedgewar, along with some other RSS members, encouraged militarization of Indian society in the model of Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany (Casolari 219-21).

Anti-fascist resistance can be taken as a lens for examining protests, organizations, and movements on a large number of issues that are affected by authoritarian state policies that privilege only certain social groups—casteism, Islamophobia, violence on Christian minorities, violence on LGBTQ+ community, and so on. These issues also vary in their nature according to geographical contexts in India. I am concerned in this paper with affective anti-fascist resistance by women on problems concerning *hijras* and Muslims in Delhi and Gujarat and Maoists in Andhra Pradesh—social and geographical coordinates that are relevant in exploring the personal documents of Anjum and Revathy. The questions I want to explore in this paper are: How do the two women characters—Anjum and Revathy—resist fascist master narratives through affects? What role is played by their personal documents in the form of counter-narratives in this resistance? The personal documents I shall explore include an oral anecdote, a collection of magazines and DVDs, a note and a letter. Through my paper, I contribute to the discourse on anti-fascism in India and its intersections with gender and affect studies.

Sara Ahmed's use of 'affects' in her work as synonymous and interchangeable with emotions is the framework I have used for reading affects within this novel. In an interview between her and Sigrid Schmitz, published in the journal, *FreiburgerZeitschrift fur GeschlechterStudien*, Ahmed says that while 'affect' is generally used to express a "bodily responsiveness to the world", she prefers the word, 'emotion' because along with the function of affect, it also encompasses how "certain kinds of things are given value over time". When she uses the term, 'affect', it is to denote "part of what emotions do." (Schmitz and Ahmed 97)

Brian Massumi in 'The Autonomy of Affect' underlines the importance of affect in right-wing discourses in the US context and that they can be mobilized to counter these discourses as well. In the postmodern era, right-wing ideology pivots not on ideology but on affects, like Reagan's confidence, which is an "emotional translation of affect" (Massumi 103). In the Indian context, with respect to Hindu fascist state policies, Arjun Appadurai's use of the word 'impunity' stands on a par with Massumi's 'confidence'. 'Impunity', in Appadurai's words, denotes "the right to brutalise others with the near guarantee of no legal consequence" (Appadurai 6).

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed examines how different figures of speech cohere with certain affects depending on past histories of their association. After that, these affects function through concealment in those particular figures of speech. Moreover, in sliding and moving from one figure of speech to another, affects are further generated (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 12-13). Mona Lilja claims on the basis of this theory of Ahmed that in case of resistance against fascism, the political institutions against



which one protests are attributed emotional value (such as hate or frustration) which becomes the very foundation of political activities. It directs the bodies protesting and makes them perform political practices. These affects also circulate within the protester's speeches, goading each other to action. Therefore, this emotional value/affective value accrued or emotion/affect generated is performative in nature, drawing bodies towards or away from the object (Lilja 345-46). My question here is how is the affective value generated by the personal documents effective in mobilizing Revathy and Anjum into resisting fascist master-narratives?

Sara Ahmed makes an interesting point in her book while talking about generation of affective value from the movement of words or figures of speech. She says: "The replacement of one word for an emotion with another word produces a narrative" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 13). Master-narratives in the context of fascist governments have always been actively used as a political tool for purposes of nation-building and their creation works in very similar ways as Ahmed points out. For instance, the use of the word 'danger' in the notorious statement '*Hindus are in danger*' peddled by the Hindu right. 'Danger' is a word that is used as a replacement for all 'non-Hindus' who are perceived to be a threat to the 'Hindu nation'. In circulation of words such as 'danger' to talk about non-Hindus, a narrative is produced that lends value to the affects like fear and hatred of the Other. Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz in their article, "National Narratives and their 'Others': Ethnicity, Class, Religion and the Gendering of National Histories" conceptualize master-narratives as national histories. However, as they argue, the nation might not be the only differential marker in master-narratives. Class, race, ethnicity, gender are also determinants of master narratives. (Berger and Lorenz) In the Hindu fascist regime, there are, therefore, different markers of the circulating master-narratives like caste, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, along with nation. These narratives impart a sense of unity to the 'categories privileged by the narration' which would be Hindu upper and middle caste cis-gender men (Bhattacharya 3). Uma Chakravarti provides an instance of how the Hindu fascist regime engages in a 'reconstruction' of a 'glorious past'— through the visual medium in the form of religious mythological serials on television like *Ramayana* (first aired in 1987) and *Mahabharat* (first aired in 1988). These visual texts are used to assert a national culture that is based on the glamorization and heroization of upper caste Hindu masculinity (in the form of Rama or Arjun) as the true national spirit. (Chakravarti) One can see how gender, caste and ethnicity intersect in such master-narratives.

Constructing counter-narratives to these master-narratives can be an effective tool of dissent, especially those mobilizing affects (to follow Massumi). As Rebecca Adami notes in "Counter Narratives as Political Contestation: Universality, Particularity and Uniqueness", counter-narratives are political acts useful in "unearthing alternative sequences, experiences, and trajectories" to make some neglected subjectivities come forward and let their voices be heard. (Adami 15) Counter-narratives can take many forms and have bases in organizing for different issues like that of caste, class, gender, ethnicity, and so on, as I have mentioned before. In case of the two women characters from Roy's novel that I shall discuss— Anjum and Revathy— gender, religious ethnicity, and caste are the issues on which their counter-narratives revolve.

### Anjum

Anjum is a Muslim *hijra*— defined as "transgender and/or transsexual male-to-female [mtf] self-organized into kinship networks with their own religion, symbolic system,

and lifestyle" (Bacchetta 144) — and a resident of Shahjahanabad, Old Delhi. She lives in a house called Khwabgah that shelters transgender women. The fascist master-narratives concerning her are mainly based on gender and ethnicity and mobilize affects like anxiety, hate and pity. Her personal documents include an oral anecdote and a collection of magazines and DVDs that she sets on fire at a point in the story.

In the transgender communities of Delhi, two terms function for the third-gender — *hijra* and *koti*. *Kotis* remain rooted in heteronormative family networks of procreation and reject the *hijra* desire for castration. This is why they are not considered 'authentic' and do not qualify for blessings and alms (Hall 129). Anjum is a *hijra* as she goes to seek money at social gatherings. A *hijra's* existence theoretically threatens the territorial integrity of a Hindu nationalist state that draws on masculine valour as the true spirit of Indian subjectivity (we could deduce this from Uma Chakravarti's discussion of the religious mythologies shown on TV). Moreover, *hijras* are a source of anxiety in the Hindu fascist discourse because *hijra* kinship threatens the compulsory heterosexual family set-up that is integral to the Hindu nationalist narrative (Saria). This threat is a construction of the Indian middle class and the British, who also popularized the association of *hijras* with the kidnap of children. The British passed the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871 to arrest 'suspect' groups, among which *hijras* were held responsible for "sodomy, kidnapping and castration". The Indian middle-class (including Hindus and Muslims) encouraged seclusion of *hijras* to particular areas of the city. These attitudes also continued into postcolonial administration (Bacchetta; Hinchy, July 2, 2019). Therefore, it is not surprising that Anjum's parents even seek medical help to enforce a masculine gender on her and avoid social stigma. For instance, Anjum's mother at first does not tell her husband that Anjum was a *hijra*. Instead, she puts all her efforts to bring her up as a boy. Finally when Anjum's father, Mulaqat Ali comes to know that Anjum is not biologically male, he decides to take her to a 'sexologist'. The sexologist warns them that while her vagina can be surgically stitched, her feminine 'tendencies' will remain intact. (Roy 16-17)

The conflict between 'characteristics' and 'tendencies' here mirrors the conflict between her affects (recorded in personal documents) and the affects of fascist master-narratives about Muslims and *hijras*. 'Tendencies' are seen as something internal that refuse to go as opposed to 'characteristics' which are exterior and can be easily manipulated (through medical procedures, in this case). In *Willful Subjects*, Sara Ahmed characterizes willfulness as that which "keep[s] coming up" while an external authority tries to suppress it (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 2). Mulaqat Ali, as an 'external authority', uses Anjum's masculine 'characteristics' as a directive to suppress her feminine 'tendencies' (which 'keep coming up') and inculcate 'manliness' in its place. As an opposition to this authority, Anjum dreams of being Borte instead of the manly Changez while listening to the romantic tale of Changez Khan and Borte Khatun (Roy 17). Her 'tendencies' are, therefore, an expression of willfulness, in which Anjum wills to embrace her femininity and to enjoy it. She thinks she will be happy when she is free to express her feminine 'tendencies' and live the life of a *hijra* in Khwabgah. "[...] You are all happy here! This is the Khwabgah!" , she says to Nimmo Gorakhpuri, a Khwabgah resident (Roy 23). Even after she has undergone the physical pains of becoming a *hijra*, she tries to find joy in her glamorous life as a famous *hijra* of Delhi.

Sara Ahmed writes that in tending towards something, the subject tends towards happiness; happiness is a 'container' for tendencies (Ahmed 4). The personal documents she collects from this life of celebrity represent not only the social acceptance of her

gender identity but how it is put on a pedestal. Filmmakers, NGOs and foreign correspondents fight over her and she is interviewed and extremely sought after. Such an elevated portrayal of her *hijra*ness generates affects that challenge anxiety, hate and pity from the master-narratives around *hijras*. The documents I refer to here include:

Three documentary films (about her) Two glossy coffee-table books of photographs (of her) Seven photo features in foreign magazines (about her) An album of press clippings from foreign newspapers in more than thirteen languages including the *New York Times*, the *London Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Globe and Mail*, *Le Monde*, *Corriere della Sera*, *La Stampa* and *Die Zeit* (about her). (Roy 57)

However, this fame and adulation is short-lived as another external authority in the form of Dr. Mukhtar intervenes through a fraudulent surgical operation that leaves her with a “patched-together body” and a “rasping” voice that scares everybody. Her celebrity and social adulation start to crumble after that (Roy 29). The magazines, documentary films, press clippings and so on serve as memorials of her past life of willfulness then onwards. Affects like exaltation, happiness and pride reflect through these documents which oppose affects like anxiety, hatred and pity that Hindu fascist narratives generate around *hijras*. They challenge the popular beliefs of *hijras* as kidnappers and deviant sexual beings by glamorizing Anjum’s sexuality and her life which are attractive enough to be featured on foreign magazines and photographed on coffee table books. The catch in these ‘glossy’ counter-narratives lies in the fact that they only portray the marketable parts of her and the adulation stays as long as those parts of her stay.

While the Hindu man is the ideal citizen of the nation, the master-narrative that Anjum and her family, like all other Muslims, have to conform to is RSS’ idea of an ideal Muslim — the “Hindu-Muslim” — which Paola Bacchetta defines as a “new invention, designating the hypothetical assimilable Muslim whose conduct would be consistent with Hindu nationalism’s nationalist, gender, and sexual normativity” (Bacchetta 151). So, a Muslim who is also a *hijra* would not qualify as a ‘hypothetical assimilable Muslim’ who sticks to ‘gender and sexual normativity’. However, gender-nonconforming individuals are further classified into suitable and unsuitable types in the Hindu fascist imagination. Quoting Jasbir Puar, Rajorshi Das writes: “one must interrogate not only how the nation disallows certain queers but perhaps more urgently, how nations produce and may in fact sanction certain queer subjectivities over others” (Das 196). He says this in context of the Hindu right-wing trans activist, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi’s memoir. In their memoir, Laxmi, through recounting their personal experience, reflects on the predicament of the community. She represents the *hijra* whose queer subjectivity is sanctioned by the nation as she is Hindu and supports right-wing policies. Laxmi’s memoir has been criticized for too much ‘celebrification’ as she is a popular figure like Anjum, but according to Das’ argument, Laxmi’s “celebrification is fuelled by her social activism” for the rights of the *hijra* community. (Das 200) Anjum’s documents also engage in ‘celebrification’ of her personal life as a glamorous *hijra* in Delhi. However, as mentioned before, these documents, which serve as memorials for Anjum later, record the commodifiable parts of her life and her identity, engaging in a ‘celebrification’ that is powered by the needs of an audience feeding on the Hindu fascist master-narrative of Muslim vilification. Therefore, the interviewers make changes to their reports about her paternal family, portraying them as ‘conventional Muslims’, who are ‘cruel’ to their gender-nonconforming child (Roy 26). We can see that although ‘celebrification’ of a *hijra* might work as a counter-narrative against fascist master-narratives of heteronormativity, generating affects like pride and happiness, they can slyly also serve the fascist ethnic master-narrative.

In "Beyond Emasculation: Being Muslim and Becoming *Hijra* in South Asia", Adnan Hossain points out that *hijras* have been found to self-identify with Muslims as "a manifestation of a minority coalitional politics where *hijra* reputedly claim a special status of affinity with Muslims based on their respective subaltern identifications" (Hossain 498). However, an identification with Muslims especially put the *hijras* at a disadvantage with Hindutva conceptions of masculinity, rendering them questionable national subjects. This is because Muslims are seen as both emasculated and hypersexual subjects any way in the Hindutva ethnic master-narrative (Hossain 498). The affects generated around Muslims are the same as around 'bogus asylum seekers' (in Sara Ahmed's words) in the Western nationalist discourses. If fear of the 'other' cannot be contained (as they could be anyone and anywhere), the narrative created through the 'passing by' of the object of fear accelerates fear into anxiety. Hate is also generated against this uncontainable 'other' as they are seen to threaten or 'take away' from the national narrative of homogeneous oneness. In a fascist nationalist discourse, hatred is used as a cohesive force to unify a privileged community (here, the Hindus) against a common enemy who may be definite or not (Muslims or persons with ideologies opposed to the Sangh's) (Ahmed, "Affective Economies", 124-125; 118).

Dibyesh Anand introduces the discourse of security as centered on the 'representations of danger'. In this sense, it is also linked closely with identity politics as how we define ourselves determines how we see the Other. How we see the Other in turn determines how we 'secure' ourselves against them. What Ahmed terms 'anxiety' is an affect similar to Anand's conception of 'insecurity'. When the Other is represented as a danger to the Self, the security discourse prompts "an abstraction, dehumanization, depersonalization, and stereotyping of the Other" so that the Other is "reduced to being a danger and hence an object that is fit for surveillance, control, policing, and possibly extermination" (Anand 155-56). The Muslims are represented in the Hindu nationalist/fascist security discourse as a 'danger' that produces 'insecurity' among Hindus. The response is a bid to exterminate Muslims, as the pogroms of 2002 in Gujarat, depicted in Roy's novel, shows. At the same time, *hijras* also embody sacredness in the Hindu mythological discourse that the Sangh combine propagates as paramount, making the social position of a Muslim *hijra* within the Hindu fascist nation-building exercise very complex.

It is owing to her being a *hijra* that Anjum is granted the opportunity to continue to survive during the Gujarat pogroms. The Hindu extremists, who were about to kill her, say to each other suddenly: "Don't kill her, brother, killing Hijras brings bad luck" (Roy 62). The revered position of the *hijras*, I argue, is owing to their own credit. It is true that Hindu mythology like the epic *Ramayana* has mention of the devotion *hijras* had for Ram and their obedience to his words (mentioned in Roy's novel as well). Even in the *Mahabharata*, another Hindu epic, there is Arjun who disguises himself as a 'eunuch' and participates in weddings and births, legitimizing the ritual contexts in which the *hijra* participate in current times (Bockrath 85-86). However, the criminalization of *hijras* in the British administration powered by the pre-existing prejudices of caste-based Hindu society necessitated their seeking refuge in Hindu religious practices (as Hindus are dominant). Therefore, despite their affinity for Islam, they claim allegiance to Hindu religious traditions as well, even in postcolonial administration to ensure their survival (Taparia 173). Ironically, the fact that they refused to kill her because she was a holy *hijra* filled Anjum with a storm of emotions: "As the days passed, her quietness gave way to something else, something restless and edgy. It coursed through her veins like an insidious

uprising, a mad insurrection against a lifetime of spurious happiness she felt she had been sentenced to" (Roy 56-57).

'Spurious happiness' makes her feel enraged and frustrated and I contend that it is 'spurious' because it is forced. It is generated through a manipulation of her 'willful' embrace of *hijra* identity to fit the fascist narrative about *hijras*. Even though this manipulation saves her life, it happens at the cost of undermining what she thought was quite a rebellious part of herself—her *hijraness* or her 'tendencies'. Sara Ahmed writes that all subjects 'will' but 'willful subjects' will in the wrong way. The container for all will, right or wrong, is happiness; it is what directs the subject's will. Those who will wrong do not find happiness, those who will right do. (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 4) An external authority in the form of the fascists malleates her 'will' to serve their ends. Her identity is split and the undesirable part of it—the Muslim ethnicity—is suppressed by placing her within a Hindu mythological context against her will. Therefore, Anjum burns the documents and then smears the ash on herself. Burning the documents is her way of further counter-narrativization by exerting her will to reject the narrative about her *hijra* identity that was constructed to serve the interests of another external authority, the state media. Smearing the ash from the burnt documents on her head and face designates a kind of victory on the master-narratives that benefit Hindu fascism.

The anecdote she recounts to Zainab is another personal document, although not in written form, that functions as an affective resistance against fascist master narratives. Zainab calls it the 'Flyover Story'. In it, Anjum recounts how she and her friends got drenched in the rain and urinated down their legs while returning from a wedding party. She omits that they had been attacked by the police (Roy 33-35). The Section 377 of the IPC (repealed in 2018) had been functioning since before the BJP came to power in the end of the 20th century, along with anti-vagrancy laws, laws against sex work, and laws against kidnapping in order to prohibit sodomy but they also enabled random acts of violence against gender-non conforming people and transgender people who tried to access public spaces. (Shah 8-9; Saria 137) The attitude of the police here is a derivative of the British and upper caste criminalization of *hijras* in the precolonial times. The Flyover Story creates a parallel imaginary space in its retelling of her experience by censoring the existence of any fascist authority. The affects it generates also oppose affects like fear which is produced through fascist narratives about who qualify to be legitimate occupants of certain public spaces (Ahmed 70).

Anjum's fear of the police had made her urinate but she tells Zainab that she urinated because she had to keep walking and she could not keep her bladder in check, which was hilarious for someone as young as Zainab. Through Zainab's happiness, Anjum succeeds in replacing her fear and trauma from the night on the flyover into happiness: "And so, in these ways, in order to please Zainab, Anjum began to rewrite a simpler, happier life for herself. The rewriting in turn began to make Anjum a simpler, happier person." (Roy 34) By rewriting her stories of fear into tales that exhume happiness, Anjum exerts her 'will' and resists affects of fascist master-narratives on the scope of *hijra* mobility.

## Revathy

Revathy is a full-time worker in the Communist Party of India (Maoist) who had been operating from the Bastar forest towards the end of her life. She appears only through her personal documents and never as a character in person in the novel. She leaves two personal documents that are both written by her—a note and a letter.

The Communist Party of India (Maoist) has since 2004 opposed the post-independence neoliberal vision of democracy of the Indian government and called for a 'New Democratic Revolution'. This revolution is aimed at establishing a 'people's democratic state under the leadership of the proletariat' that will 'guarantee real democracy for the vast majority of people while exercising dictatorship over a tiny minority of exploiters'. The People's Liberation Army, in which Revathy worked, is their supporting underground group. (Chandra 414) In Andhra Pradesh, a shift from mass mobilization to armed struggle and from tactics that address people's daily problems to the aim to cease state power has become a more widely followed model for the Naxalite/Maoist movement. The party got banned as a terrorist organization in 2009 under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act while the Indian government itself has no other political party who have focused on the rural poor—Dalits and Adivasis who suffer everyday under the oppression of bigger landowners and rich farmers—with 'such single-minded zeal and devotion'. (Harriss 12-14) However, women's exploitation within the party, especially of women belonging to the lower caste, is a well known malady. The top ranks of the party still have men from upper or middle castes. The lower caste (Dalit and Adivasi) women and men are mobilized for the revolutionary ends of the Maoists but they are never promoted to top leadership posts. (Chandra 416) Women's motives to join the party are affected by their poor economic condition and the desire to seek revenge against sexual exploitation by paramilitary (installed by the government to crush the Maoist activists) or men from their own community. Even though there are cases of women leaving the party to become pro-state because of exploitation within the party as well, most women stay back just like Revathy did because the party is a refuge for them and gives them a purpose in life. (Maheshwari 3) This is why Revathy renounces the baby in order to continue to work full-time for the party. The note bears testimony to her dedication for anti-fascist work over the desire for a family: "I cannot look after this child. So I am leaving her here." (Roy 118)

Sara Ahmed in her book, *The Pursuit of Happiness* talks about the figure of the happy housewife as a narrative that has accrued immense affective power in a patriarchal society. Happiness, according to the narrative, is not what the housewife is but what she does. Along with heterosexual intimacy, motherhood is also a crucial part of this happiness. (Ahmed 51-53) Revathy rejects this narrative of the happy housewife (or a happy mother in her case) and identifies her party as her source of happiness. She declares in the note that she was leaving her child because she could not 'look after' her, in other words, renouncing the very care-giving functions of a happy housewife that would supposedly bring her happiness. In embracing her party as her 'Mother and Father', Revathy adheres to an alternate kinship structure like Anjum does, and refuses the heterosexual family structure—the structure that the happy housewife is supposed to inhabit (Roy 425). She even refuses to call herself the baby's mother although she admits to giving birth to her: "[...] I am not her mother. River is her mother and Forest is her father" (Roy 418). In the note, she underlines her unwillingness to follow the narrative of happiness that the police as representatives of a fascist state tried to force on her as they violated her: "Now you go and marry someone. Settle down quietly" (Roy 422). The police officers say these words to enforce her into the happy housewife narrative which would help her stick to the narrative of domesticity 'quietly' instead of raising her voice against fascist oppression in Central India. After all, speaking up and not being 'quiet' would mean causing trouble, questioning the fascist authority (Ahmed 61). In the note, she rejects this model of

happiness outrightly by stating in clear 'unambiguous' words her refusal to play the role of a mother — to 'look after' her baby. Her letter to Dr. Azad Bhartiya — the only part of the novel that talks about her — needs to be examined to gain a broader and deeper context on her affective resistance against fascist forces of the state.

The Indian government began Operation Green Hunt in the Red Corridor (the areas running from Nepalese border through the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh, where Maoist resurgence is active) in 2008. To the center and state governments, the Maoists pose the 'greatest internal security threat to India since independence'. (Chandra 414) This is the reason they have installed the paramilitary as part of Operation Green Hunt to curb the influence of the Maoists and facilitate takeover of forest lands for socio-economic developmental purposes. (Harriss 24) It is important to remember that the government at the centre has not always been BJP, and the Congress Party of India and CPI (M) (when in power) have also implemented fascist policies on the Red Corridor. Ashok Kumbamu writes in his chapter, "The Naxalite Movement, the Oppressive State, and the Revolutionary Struggle in India," that there has been 'mass burning and grouping of villages' in Bastar, a strategy first implemented by the BJP government in 1990-1991, creating and acting through their vigilante group, *Jan Jagran Abhiyan* (JJA). The JJA forced the dalits and adivasis to 'rally against the Maoists, killed many adivasis who they suspected as supporters of the Maoists, raped women, and burned their houses' (Kumbamu 239). Revathy's letter, through its recounting of her biography and the context of her baby's birth, functions as a counter-narrative against the master-narratives propagated by such vigilante groups of the government against the Maoists. While her note resists the affects in the happy housewife narrative the state forces tried to impose on her, her letter resists affects like fear (propagated in master-narratives against Maoists) and disgust (spread through Hindu upper and middle-caste master-narratives against dalits and adivasis). In Revathy's case, her caste and her political affiliation intersect as she becomes the target of violence by the paramilitary.

In her letter, Revathy writes that her mother had to suffer extreme abuse at the hands of her father because she was born with a dark-skin while her mother was of a lighter complexion. Her father's family suspected her of being born of an illegitimate union between her mother and a lower-caste man: "My father's family came to know how black I was. They had that caste and color feeling. They said I was not theirs but a Mala or Madiga girl, not a BC but a SC Schedule Caste girl" (Roy 419). K. Srinivasulu, in his book, documents the differentiation between the Backward Castes (BC) and Scheduled Castes in Andhra Pradesh vis-à-vis their socio-economic position. The former (46.1% of the population) enjoy a superior position and some of them work as weavers, shepherds, toddy-tappers, etc. The latter (17% of the population) are considered inferior and work as leather-workers or in agriculture (Srinivasulu 4-5). What Revathy calls 'that caste and color feeling' is disgust, an affect that generates through the circulation of casteist master-narratives. Revathy might be perceived as an SC but she still is a BC, which is also a lower caste category compared to the Hindu upper and middle castes. The moment of her rape is also marked by the reference to her complexion and its casteist baggage as the police say: "Don't worry Blackie we will let you go" (Roy 422).

Dipesh Chakraborty's "The Dalit Body: A Reading for the Anthropocene" discusses upper caste association of disgust with the lower caste body: "In the Brahmanical scheme of things, the body of the 'untouchable' person was considered untouchable precisely

because it was invested with a certain degree of disgust-arousing significance. This disgust was the emotional source of the marginalization and oppression of the Dalit" (Chakraborty 3). Disgust produces the desire to exclude the object of disgust and the fascist culture of exclusion of minorities and the violence on them have deep roots in disgust. To provide an obvious instance, in Nazi Germany (and rest of anti-Semitic Europe), Jews were depicted as 'hyperbodily, smelly, and hyper-sexual' (Hasan et.al. 4). Projective disgust always involves some form of avoidance of contact but it might vary according to persons or situations. For instance, while Africans were forbidden from using white people's fountains, lunch counters, hotel beds and from sexual contact with white women, white men regularly harassed and sexually abused black women (4-5). When seen in the context of Revathy's rape, one can observe this complex relationship of disgust with physical or sexual violence. The letter documents disgust and as a counter-narrative by Revathy, also her hatred for the child that is produced in the execution of disgust through rape: "When I saw her first I felt very much hatred. I felt that six police fellows cutting me with blades and burning me with cigarettes. I thought to kill her" (Roy 425). She does not kill her only because she is a 'small and cute baby'. Instead of submission, there is hate and she even refuses to keep the baby with her to underline her hate and dissociation from the object of hate.

Revathy also counters the master-narrative of fear against the Maoists but her affects are not biased and blind to the party's flaws. In an authoritarian regime of Hindu nationalism, the demand for protection of rights by the minorities is framed within a narrative of fear—the fear of the minorities taking over the nation that rightfully belongs to the Hindu upper caste. Any progressive social or environmental movements that question this narrative would be treated as a threat (Anand 153-158). This is why the Maoists have been labelled as the 'greatest internal security threat to India', which Revathy opposes in her letter by writing about the party's activities—raising awareness about class inequality and rising poverty in the slums and villages inhabited by dalits and adivasis— and how the paramilitary operated against them in the Red Corridor (Roy 420). Later, as she is concluding her letter, she mentions that the Maoist party has its own problems: "Many times it does many wrong things. Kills wrong people. [...] Party says men and women are equal, but still they never understand" (Roy 425).

Gender discrimination and corruption within the party has been reported immensely in official records even though the party religiously defends its dedication to gender equity and mitigation of women's issues in the villages and slums. Swati Parashar et.al. in their article "(En)Gendering the Maoist insurgency in India: Between Rhetoric and Reality", highlight that women are sometimes abused within the party and their marginalized subjectivity in terms of gender have frequently been overlooked. Women's absence in higher echelons of the party ensures that violence against women within the party are not discussed at higher levels nor does it form the core of their public discourse (Parashar et. al 455). When Revathy tries to talk about her rape to the party leader, he says: "I don't understand this feelings nonsense. We are soldiers. Tell me like a report without emotions" (Roy 424). The refusal to address feelings makes the party come off as an equally masculinist enterprise where women's feelings are reduced to insignificance or 'nonsense'. Therefore, Revathy in documenting her rape with affects like hate, pity for the 'small and cute' baby, terror and alienation when told that women in the party cannot have children, constructs an account against the directives of her party as well.



## Conclusion

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a fictional platform of counter-narratives in which women characters opposing fascist state structures from different parts of the country assemble. Their narratives oppose the master-narratives about their community, gender, caste, and ethnicity, affectively through their personal documents. Hate, fear and disgust are challenged by pride, willfulness, unhappiness, and a host of other emotions. The reader is influenced through these counter-narratives to think of the novel as an alternate space where affects, particularly women's affects, are taken into consideration as a crucial component of both fascist and anti-fascist discourse of nation-building.

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# Melting Façades: Ice-Candy Man and the Spatial Production of Hira Mandi in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*

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**Abstract:** In Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India*, Ice-candy man's victimization of Ayah reveals the vulnerability of women's bodies during the Partition movement. This essay will explore how the varied personas he assumes within the story—the poet and the cultured courtier—work to actively produce the space of Hira Mandi. Moreover, I connect these spatial strategies to the larger spatial construction of the nation-state of India. In doing so, I show how the textual space of Hira Mandi and the territorial space of the nation-state are produced in similar ways. Finally, I explore how Lenny's Godmother dismantles Ice-candy man's façade and inscribes resistance to oppressive spatial strategies.

*Keywords:* Partition, spatial production, violence, nation-state, postcolonialism

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* is about the Partition of India and Pakistan as seen through the eyes of Lenny Sethi, a Parsi girl who resides in Lahore in the 1940s. Witnessing the vast changes brought about by the “cracking” of India in 1947 into two nation-states, Lenny comes to understand that a city and its inhabitants are permanently changed through this event. Through the character of Ayah, Lenny's Hindu nanny, Sidhwa especially situates the vulnerability of women's bodies to abuse during religious and national conflict. Prior to Partition, Ayah is the epitome of desirability, attracting men from varied religions and professions who court her attention and body. However, during Partition, she is abducted and raped by a mob of Muslim men led by Ice-candy man, one of her former suitors. Later, Ice-candy man becomes her pimp, making her a “dancing girl” in the Hira Mandi, the red light district of Lahore, and eventually marries her to “save her” (Sidhwa 261) from disgrace.

Much like the popsicles he sells, Ice-candy man's face can melt seamlessly from one form to another. As Birdman, he sells sparrows and parrots. As a poet, he spouts Urdu poetry effortlessly. As a Mogul courtier, he smacks of ancient royalty and passion. However, as we shall see, each of these personas hides violence under a garb of performance and euphemism. Additionally, Ice-candy man as a poet and a Mogul courtier not only *inhabits* the space of Hira Mandi but actively *produces* it. Discourses of art and history construct Hira Mandi as an oppressive space that is shielded by an appearance of glamor and regality. This paper will also connect the strategies of artistic and historiographic discourse that Ice-candy man uses to spatially construct Hira Mandi to touch on the larger spatial construction of the nation-state of India. In doing so, I show how the textual space of Hira Mandi and the territorial space of the nation-state are produced in similar ways. Finally, I will explore how Lenny's Godmother dismantles Ice-candy man's façade, exposing the “routine violence” (Pandey 1) inherent in the space of Hira Mandi and thus inscribing resistance to oppressive spatial strategies.

How does physical space function as a dynamic arena rife with power play? How are art and history used within nationalist discourse to hide the space of a nation-state as one where “violence ... [is] often dispensed with dream-eyed idealism”? (Chakrabarty 43) Can this spatial artifice be exposed? These are the larger questions guiding this paper. They are worth looking into because not enough attention has been paid to how space functions in discursive ways in South Asian contexts. Much of the scholarship on this novel, for example, focuses on its gender politics<sup>1</sup> and its status as part of the body of Partition literature that represents minority voices challenging official statist narratives.<sup>2</sup> While these are important perspectives, this paper draws attention to the different strategies by which space is produced within the novel and outside it and corroborates the observation that “space and behavior are intimately and intricately linked” (Jackson 57). I draw from the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja, and postcolonial historians like Gyanendra Pandey, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty to place this novel at the intersection of spatial studies and postcolonial studies. This essay also close reads *Cracking India*, paying special attention to the various transformations of Ice-candy man and how they produce the spaces of Hira Mandi and, likewise, the nation-state of India.

### The Space of Hira Mandi

I want to begin with the importance of considering space as beyond just a physical setting. Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* is a crucial theoretical text that helps orient focus on how space interacts with power. In this groundbreaking work, Lefebvre argues that space is customarily presented as a fixed geographical arena devoid of meaning, as a backdrop for action to occur. He calls this seemingly homogenous space as *abstract space*. As he explains it, “Capitalism and neocapitalism have produced abstract space, which includes the ‘world of commodities’, its ‘logic’ ... as well as the power of money and that of the political state” (53). In other words, abstract space is that which is produced by hegemonies to assert power over society (and for Lefebvre, a Marxist, this primarily produced by capitalism). Echoing Lefebvre, Edward Soja, another postmodern geographer, asks us to consider “how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life” (6). Space, he asserts, is far from “innocent”; it is a construct that is controlled by those in power, and maintained by violence (Lefebvre 52).

Both Lefebvre and Soja ask us to pay attention to how space appears to be undifferentiated and uniform but in reality is constituted by heterogeneity. It entwines layers of perceptions and meanings which can and must be contested. Because power works itself out through space and its production, sustained attention to territories is crucial in identifying and subverting dominant discourse. Along with them, I ask in this paper: how is a particular space produced and appropriated? What violence does this space hide behind its façade of homogeneity? Lefebvre points to the nation-state as an abstract space but I would argue that within *Cracking India*, we have another abstract space as well: Hira Mandi.

What do we know about the physical space of Hira Mandi in Pakistan? As the red light district of Lahore, Hira Mandi occupies a central place in the cultural imaginary. It is located within the old part of the walled city, flanked by the majestic Lahore Fort which was built by the Mughals, and the famed Badshahi Mosque. Historically, Mughal emperors constructed it to house their royal courtesans—dancers of artistic renown. While its present-day dancers are less concerned with the elite ethos of the performing arts tied to

its birth, the Hira Mandi still functions as a site of prostitution. As Louise Brown points out, although the outward form of the dancers has changed over the centuries, the logic of the exchange of social, economic, and sexual capital that underpins the dancing remains the same. "Wealthy men buy a re-worked cultural performance of prostitution" (Brown 411), inscribing Hira Mandi as a hybridized space that mingles the ancient and the modern. This hybridity is also reflected in its constituent demography. It brings together under one roof those considered as urban outcasts and the wealthy men who want to use their services (Chambers 115).

Lenny, the child narrator, however, does not apprehend the darker undertones of Hira Mandi. She constantly interprets outward signifiers at face value, mistaking the façade of glamor for reality. We see this in Lenny's conversation with her sexually-enlightened Cousin about Hira Mandi. Having spotted Ayah for the first time since her abduction, Cousin excitedly reveals to Lenny that he is certain Ayah is now a dancer at the Hira Mandi. Lenny misinterprets the linguistic signifiers because they are masked by glitz-tinted euphemisms. Firstly, she assumes that a dancing girl is akin to a glamorous actress. For her, this explains why Ayah had heavy make-up on when Cousin saw her whisked away in a car. Secondly, since Hira Mandi literally means Diamond Market, Lenny assumes that it is a shop for diamonds. Even when Cousin impatiently informs her, "the girls are the diamonds! The men pay them to dance and sing ... and to do things with their bodies" (252), Lenny still does not fully comprehend the violence that is masked behind the language of the dancing diamonds. Cosmetics and clothing also hide from Lenny the darker goings-on in the Hira Mandi. When Lenny later meets Ayah at her home in the Hira Mandi, she finds Ayah's outward appearance—bedecked with tinsel glitter, jewels, and high heels—"achingly lovely" (273), and her new Muslim name, Mumtaz, "fitting" (272). Finally, the physical space of Ayah's new home also tricks Lenny. She finds the glossy-green velvet sofas, ornate chairs, and the pink wall paint appealing like a "cool and delicious tutti-frutti ice cream" (272). For Lenny, euphemistic language, cosmetics, and spatial décor all combine to create the Hira Mandi as a space that resembles "a cross between a Swiss finishing school ... and a School for the Fine and Performing Arts" (279). Violence is absent from the picture, successfully hidden away behind a veneer of glamor.

Lenny's perception of Hira Mandi is solidified through how Ice-candy man produces this space. In fact, if not for his character, we (and Ayah and Lenny) may never have been introduced to Hira Mandi to being with. Thus, Ice-candy man is a crucial piece in this spatial analysis. He is intimately connected to the space of Hira Mandi in that he "belongs" there. Not only does he make Ayah a dancing girl in this space, he also settles with her there after marrying her, identifying it as "home". Additionally, his lineage is rooted in the kotha as well, his mother having been a dancer there. He proudly traces his ancestry to the "royal bastards" (258) of the past, connecting Hira Mandi as his "home" in an even larger transhistorical sense. However, not only does he "belong" in that space, he actively produces that space as, to use Lefebvre's term, an abstract space. As we will see, the strategies by which he does this finds a corollary in his many "elastic" faces (259). Just as his outwards persona as a seller of ice-candy transforms into many other personas over the course of the novel, the homogenous nature of the Hira Mandi is exposed as arena split into a spectrum of layers, especially through Godmother. Ice-candy man becomes the multi-faceted embodiment of the various ideologies underpinning the brothel, and this essay will see the character and the space in conjunction with each other.

### **Ice-Candy Man the Birdman: The Precursor to the “Mandi Pimp”**

While Ice-candy man is linked to the Hira Mandi only in the final pages of the novel, we encounter from the beginning his casual treatment of violence. In one of the earlier scenes, Lenny describes how he “transforms himself into a birdman” (35) on the colder days when his ice-candy sales plummet. He coaxes unassuming English women into buying his caged parrots and sparrows through theatrics, brandishing a razor furiously and threatening to cut their heads. As the narrative and his performance progress, Lenny refers to him as Birdman—with capitalization—as if he no longer *acts* as this figure but *becomes one* with it. As their owner, Birdman has the power to cage the birds, and, for economic gain, taunt them mercilessly with brutality. His theatrics of violence is predicated and excused on a logic of possession and economics: the birds are his and he can do with them as he pleases for the sake of his livelihood. Moreover, even Lenny and Ayah normalize this logic. As they watch his performance, they are enthralled, applauding and excitedly shrieking, “cut their throats!” (36)

This scene occurs before the Partition—before Ice-candy man throws grenades into Hindu and Sikh houses, before he is part of the mob that gang-rapes Ayah, and before he forces her to become a prostitute. At this stage, he does not actually inflict physical violence on his possession. However, I would argue that his action not only narratively foreshadows his explosive violence later but is also the moral precursor to it. It embodies “the spirit of violence” that Gyanendra Pandey describes is present as “the prehistory of the more glaring and physical acts of political violence” (11). The persona of the Birdman shows that the violence that constituted the Partition was not an aberration, as Indian nationalist historiography has often portrayed, but was part of an existing pattern made unremarkable and invisible through normalization. More specifically, as Madhuparna Mitra argues, Ayah’s abduction too should be seen as part of a continuum in which there is a “routine acceptance of casual, almost banal violence” (26). Birdman is the forerunner to the “Mandi pimp” (Sidhwa 257).

Unlike Birdman, Ice-candy man the Mandi pimp is not a theatrical persona who merely *threatens* violence. Ayah’s body is persistently battered behind an aura of dance, glitter, and glory. The logic of possession and economics that underscores Birdman’s violence is taken to its sexual end within the space of the Hira Mandi. In the next section, we will see how Ice-candy man uses his personas to construct this space. Parallely, we shall also see how the space of the nation-state too is constructed using similar strategies.

### **“The Poet Approacheth”: Art and Spatial Production**

When Ice-candy man comes to visit Lenny and her Godmother months after the Partition riots, they are stunned at his “incredible transformation” (257). He is no longer an uncouth thug “inhaling from the stinking cigarettes clenched in his fist” (37) but a poet with “dreamy kohl-rimmed eyes” (257), donning white muslin and a Jinnah cap. Not only has attire changed, his mannerisms and words too bespeak a shift from his old self. Reciting Urdu poets like Wali Dakni and Faiz Ahmed Faiz flawlessly with emotive gestures, Ice-candy man fits perfectly into his new persona. In fact, Lenny is so convinced by his transformation that, upon seeing him, she declares that “the poet approacheth” (256). Although subtle and momentary, this shift to an archaic tone in the narratorial voice registers the powerful magnetism of Ice-candy man’s “orbit of ... poetic vision” (275). As with Birdman, he becomes one with his new persona. Through the rest of the

novel, he recites Urdu poetry effortlessly and regularly to express his emotions, sealing the seeming authenticity of his transformation.

Poetry is only part of the artistic subject of Ice-candy man's effusive declamations; as a poet of Hira Mandi, he also becomes an art connoisseur more generally. He exalts Ayah's dancing and singing, praising her "divine gift". "She has the voice of an angel," he says, "and the grace and rhythm of a goddess" (259). In interweaving religious language into his description, Ice-candy man infuses a spiritual ethos into Ayah's performances. He elevates her bodily performance to a divine level, converting the Hira Mandi itself into an otherworldly space. In the picture Ice-candy man paints, listening to and watching Ayah transports her audience to a supernatural, ethereal space. Additionally, because of her skills, she is able "to command fancy prices" (259). Ice-candy man is not only careful to leave out from *whom* exactly she commands these payments (and who constitutes her audience) but also positions her as if she has control.

This portrayal of Ayah as a goddess who commands by virtue of her artistic skills produces Hira Mandi as a space in which poetry, dance, and music enthrall audiences. Eliding any hint of sexual violence or economic swindling, Ice-candy man constructs this space of prostitution as an artist's paradise. No wonder then that Lenny is befuddled by the contempt with which this "Institute of Culture" (279) is held by her Godmother. Ice-candy man's discourse normalizes the violence that underlies Hira Mandi through the façade of art.

In addition to the role of art in the spatiality of Hira Mandi, I want to suggest here that art is also often used to create the space of the Indian nation-state in a way that draws the curtains on its more unseemly aspects. Patriotic songs, speeches, and poems often exalt the nation by presenting only qualities that inspire nationalist fervor, such as democratic and secular principles which promote a spirit of "unity in diversity" (Pozza 200, Pandey 22). This spirit, however, is often undercut by a conscious or unconscious exclusion of marginal groups within the nation. For example, Andre J. P. Elias notes how India's national song *Vande Mataram* "reinforces a history of xenophobic and gendered associations with national purity" (92) through the ubiquitous nationalist metaphor of the motherland. Also paralleling Ice-candy man's designation of Ayah as a deity, the space of the nation-state is often produced by equating it to the figure of a goddess to be worshipped. As Sumathi Ramaswamy argues, the deployment of this bodyscape, especially within visual culture, transforms the nation from an empty geographical space to a space infused with spiritual meaning and deserving of affection. Inscribing the gendered body within the center of a nationalist discourse is a spatial strategy that effectively erases actual female subjects by elevating the spectacular female as the norm. Thus, like Ice-candy man uses art (and with it, the female body) to create the Hira Mandi as an ideal, homogenous space, art that follows a nationalist paradigm often chooses to ignore the violence implicit in making of the nation-state.

### **"He Sounds Like a Cultured Courtier": History and Spatial Production**

Ice-candy man's use of the glory of art is entwined with his use of history to spatially produce Hira Mandi as a site of glamor. To explain to Godmother and Lenny why Hira Mandi is located in the shadow of the Old Mogul Fort, the Poet turns to its origin story. He tells them that Hira Mandi was built by the Mogul princes for their favorite concubines and their children. He christens it, with a mixture of shame and pride, "the cradle of the royal bastards" (258). He further elucidates that his mother belonged to "the old stock" (259) that descended from the House of Bahadur Shah, the Mogul emperor, as opposed

to the newer, run-of-the-mill prostitutes who lived under pimps. We can note several things in this narrative. Firstly, that pride is mingled with into this story points to the importance Ice-candy man places on his royal, even if slightly scandalous, lineage. He takes pains to set this distinguished lineage apart, making sure that his listeners understand that Ayah no common prostitute (and, by implication, he is no common pimp). Secondly, he doesn't seem to realize that there is only a very thin line—indeed, one could argue there is hardly any line at all—between the essential positions of the royal dancers and the common prostitutes.

This realization does not, understandably, strike our child-narrator either. In fact, to Lenny, the revelation of this royal heritage turns Ice-candy man into a Mogul courtier himself. Upon hearing this story, Lenny notes that “he sounds like a cultured courtier. His face, too, has acquired the almond-eyed, thin-lipped profile of the handsome Moguls portrayed in miniatures” (259). Later, when she and Godmother visit them at Hira Mandi, Ice-candy man “displays the exquisite courtesy of Mogul courtiers” (271). Lenny also thinks, upon hearing that Mumtaz is Ayah's new name, that “it is fitting that a courtier's wife be named after a Mogul queen” (272). For Lenny, Ice-candy man not only looks and behaves like a Mogul courtier, he has become one, paralleling his other transformations.

As a Mogul courtier, Ice-candy man produces the Hira Mandi as a space with the history of Muslim nobility as its bedrock. He mingles the glories of a past rooted in religion and royalty, even renaming Ayah after the wife of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan for whom the Taj Mahal was built. Two implications are clear from this renaming. Firstly, Ayah is no longer a “mere” Hindu nanny but, by virtue of their marriage, now part of the Muslim royal lineage to which Ice-candy man believes he too belongs. Ayah's original identity—her familial history, her religion, her profession—have all been erased. Secondly, her new name forcibly draws her into a relationship with Ice-candy man that is steeped with notions of timeless passion and romantic love. This Mogul courtier wants the world to know that his Mumtaz is the object of his ardent affection (even if his Mumtaz hardly shares the same sentiments), an affection having a famous historical precursor. He may not be able to build her a marble mausoleum but he will at least turn their home at Hira Mandi, as we have already noted, to resemble a space fit for royalty. Ice-candy man the Mogul courtier is also the timeless lover.

We have seen here how Hira Mandi becomes a space not only produced by art but also looks to history to derive its value. This history glorifies the dancing girls because of their connection with Mogul royalty, choosing to ignore the unjust and self-serving attitudes of the emperors in their treatment of the concubines and their children. Moreover, this very history also sanitizes Ice-candy man's violence towards dancing girls like Ayah by justifying her subjugation within Hira Mandi.

In a similar way, the space of the nation-state is also produced through history. In the case of India, the anticolonial movement relied on writing a version of history that countervailed colonial representations of India as “backward” and “uncivilized”. As a result, the Hindu past before Mughal rule was glorified as the ideal to which India needed to return. As Partha Chatterjee has shown, this nationalist move of using history as the source of nationhood still has implications for today (Chatterjee 60). The singularity of Indian historiography homogenizes the space of India as belonging to the Hindus, leading to the marginalization and oppression of minority religious groups. Like the abstract space of Hira Mandi silences violent undertones, the space of India produced by nationalist history silences subaltern voices that opposed or were excluded by nationalist



discourse. Additionally, like history abets Ice-candy man's tentacles of passion, nationalist history aims at stirring patriotism for the country. The loyalty of citizens towards a territorial space is crucial to the formation of the nation-state, as we see in partition literature like this one; a historiography that posits a specific glorious era as associated with a certain group of people and their lineage stirs nationalist fervor at the expense of other groups.

### **"Oh? What Kind of Man? A Royal Pimp?": Deconstructing the Artifice**

To end this paper, I want to draw attention to how Sidhwa deconstructs the elaborate illusion Ice-candy man erects. As we have seen, he spatially produces Hira Mandi as a performer's paradise and a regal space rooted in history. In doing so, he hides the violence he perpetrates against Ayah and relegates her to quiet submission. As a child narrator, Lenny buys into this discourse of deception, seeing Hira Mandi the way Ice-candy man has produced it: glamorous, romantic, and safe. She even sees him as a "misused lover" (274), empathizing with him when Ayah/Mumtaz refuses his cajoling.

However, through Godmother, Ice-candy man and Hira Mandi are exposed. In what turns out to be an explosive conversation when Ice-candy man the Poet visits them, Godmother lays bare the contradictions of his representation. Challenging his narrative of "saving" Ayah from being killed by marrying her, she tells him that he purports to be Ayah's protector but also allowed her to be gangraped. Furthermore, she dismantles his euphemisms: words like "rape", "disgraced", "destroyed" "shameless" replace the glitzy picture Ice-candy man has painted. According to Godmother, he has "trapped [Ayah] in the poisonous atmosphere of the Kotha" (261). In this opposing narrative, Ayah is no goddess and the Hira Mandi is no glorious, ethereal space. Instead, it is a space where violence is inscribed on the woman's body in the name of art. Finally, Godmother also attacks his personhood. When Ice-candy man tells her despairingly that he cannot be expected to be faithful because he is only a man, Godmother lashes back, "Oh? What kind of man? A royal pimp? What kind of man would allow his wife to dance like a performing monkey before other men? You're not a man, you're a low-born, two-bit evil little mouse!" (260) In one swoop, she removes all pretensions by reinterpreting Ayah's dancing (or art) and Ice-candy man's identity (or "royal" history). Godmother reveals the logic of possession, violence, and economics that undergird Hira Mandi, and in doing so, she counter-produces that space.

While the narrative primarily relies on godmother for exposing the homogenizing abstract space of Hira Mandi, Ayah too resists in her own way. When Godmother and Lenny go to visit her, Ayah's voice is just a whisper but she is firm when she says she will not live with Ice-candy man. Even at the risk of being rejected by her family, she is determined to return to Amritsar. Unlike for Ice-candy man, Hira Mandi is not home (much less, a palace) for Ayah; it is a prison in which violence has left its traumatic mark. In the end, at Godmother's urging, she washes her face. Ayah is not only wiping away her overly made-up dancing-girl face, she is also exposing the battered self behind all the artifice of the Hira Mandi.

Godmother deconstructs Hira Mandi by identifying and attacking the linguistic euphemisms that represent that space. She pinpoints how Ice-candy man uses art and history to hide the violence perpetrated by Ice-candy man upon Ayah. Through this and Ayah's own resistance, a spatiality of "contending politics and contending subject positions" (Pandey 18) is inscribed.

We have seen how space is not a static entity sitting as a backdrop but a dynamic, socially constructed arena with political possibilities. This is true not only for a textual space like Hira Mandi but also real spaces like the nation-state. Space and power are constitutive of each other, often used by hegemonic practices for their own ends through various strategies. But this space is not devoid of resistance either, as this paper has observed. Partition literature like *Cracking India* shows us how spatial practices and discourses can be exposed and subverted.

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# Tribes in Transition: Representation of Conflict in Tamsula Ao's Short Fiction

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to explore representation of conflict from the standpoint of history and aesthetics. Going beyond existing approaches, the need is to examine how Indian English literary expressions from conflict zones are as much works of art as they are political statements. For the purpose we shall examine the short fiction of Tamsula Ao, a woman writer from Nagaland.

*Keywords:* Conflict, Short-fiction, History, Humanism, Aesthetics.

The phrase 'Tribes in Transition' is an entry point into the Indian English fiction of the Naga writer Tamsula Ao. The process of transition of any society is crucial to understanding its contemporary predicament. Movement from past to the present and connection between the two time-frames is a source of many insights. Nagaland's past is characterized by conflict as is its present, though in different terms. A circumstance that had its beginning in the nineteen forties is still relevant and continues to find space in contemporary narratives; this establishes the significance of the particular aspect of Naga history.

While Ao's engagement with the dynamics of the violent phenomenon is primarily rooted in the twentieth century, the issues that first fuelled militarization in Nagaland continue to surface even now though in a changed form. Her short stories then, put in perspective a decisive part of the Naga reality, contributing to a complex understanding of the present. As we explore the political dimension of writings from militarized societies, it is equally crucial to address their aesthetic aspect. The latter being an underexplored facet, this paper seeks to weave together an understanding of both, the political and the aesthetic in Tamsula Ao's short fiction.

Conflict in Northeast India comprises a common ground of concerns, while each region has a specific dynamic of conflict it witnesses. Broadly stating, the concerns of preserving indigenous identity and resenting a biased treatment by the nation's 'mainland' are some reasons behind conflict in each region of Northeast India. Tamsula Ao, a Naga writer of short fiction, engages with issues in Nagaland in particular. She discusses the atmosphere of unrest in the region and the way it has been impacting common people's life. Problematic actions of the state forces and the way life transpires in the region despite conflict are some concerns Ao engages with.

In her short stories, both political and the aesthetic aspect of conflict become evident. One may note that oftentimes, it is the political that takes the center-stage in discussions of literature from troubled regions. However, it is equally important to look at the way the aesthetic of such narratives is impacted by the circumstance of unrest, leading to new definitions of form and beauty. This paper will explore representation of conflict in Ao's fiction, with focus on both the concerns of history and those of the aesthetic. For this

purpose, Tamsula Ao's two short-story collections *Laburnum for my Head* (2009) and *These Hills called Home: Stories from a Warzone* (2005) shall be taken up for analysis.

### **Nagaland in Ao's fiction**

Tamsula Ao's short stories are largely based in villages of Nagaland, often moving to the town of Mokokchung and other urban centers. Villages have councils that comprise men. Women are conspicuous by their absence in structures of decision-making. In the village, people are seen working in the fields and those who move to towns join government offices—some join the police, others become government contractors. One also finds that nature has a distinct presence in the lives of the people in the region. In Ao's fiction, one finds mention of long winding roads in the hills, dense forests through which the insurgents are seen making their way and laburnum flowers growing in the cemetery. There is also a strong sense of community amidst people; they have close-knit relationships. In situations of violence perpetrated by insurgents or the security forces, people act together. Society is one big unit where people do not shy away from advising each other or even discuss others' life amongst themselves. Cultural details about folk songs, community celebrations, that find mention in Ao's fiction, make us aware of the vivid social dynamics of the Nagaland.

However, in sharp contrast to this is the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. The circumstance is made stark by violence caused by the insurgents and that which is unleashed during the counterinsurgency operations of the government forces. In this extremely polarized circumstance, common people face the dilemma of who to side with. Remaining neutral is not an option; on occasions a village is seen supporting the insurgents' cause by paying them taxes and other times one witnesses informers who reveal information about the insurgents' whereabouts to the government. These vivid details are engaging, acquainting the reader with the felt-experience of those bearing the brunt of conflict.

History of the circumstance of unrest in Nagaland goes back to the times when India was under the British dominion. Nagas were a community of people living in harmony in different villages. Each village was sovereign and had a village elder as a figure of authority. Natives of the region did not wish to be a part of the Indian mainland after independence from the British. They even expressed this concern to the Simon Commission.

The club [Naga Club in Pre-independence times] submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929, in which it stated that the Nagas and the people of mainland India had nothing in common between them. Therefore it would benefit both to stay separate and form their own political entities when the British left India. (Goswami 91)<sup>1</sup>

This fact their being unable to identify themselves with the country's mainland, was one of the initial reasons that fuelled the desire for independence in the Naga tribe. They wished for a separate Naga nation. However after the British left, the region then called the Naga Hills, was incorporated as a district of Assam, much against the wishes of the people in the region. In 1951 these people conducted a plebiscite in which majority of the people voted for having an independent nation of their own. This, when communicated to the government, was not met with immediate approval and gave rise to the conflict that has got no decisive answer since then. With time, the dissenting members of the tribes organised themselves into insurgent groups<sup>2</sup> to fight for the 'cause'.

### Tribes in Transition

History is a process, where past, present and future are not mutually exclusive entities. Instead, when considered together, they weave a perspective that is nuanced. First story relevant in this context is "The Last Song". Postscript of the story comprises an old woman telling a tale to a group of youngsters who are home for vacations. This setting immediately makes one aware of the figure of the grandmother as a link between the past and the present, where the present is symbolized by the young people. She asks them to listen to the sound of a peculiar wind that is blowing from the graveyard. But the youngsters are unable to listen to it. The narrator says,

At first the youngsters are skeptical and tell her that they cannot hear anything and that such things are not possible, but the old woman rebukes them by saying that they are not paying enough attention to what is happening around them. (Ao, *These Hills* 32)

This incident makes us aware of the writer's thoughts on the current situation in Nagaland vis-a-vis its youngsters and their role in this indelible violent reality of the region. For education or employment, the young shift from villages to other cities within the region or to different other parts of the country. This going away, in the context, seems to have caused a certain disconnect with the community's customs and more importantly with its past. They need to be brought back in touch with the experience and emotion of their own people, who acted with courage in the event of painful challenges. In the story, wind blowing from the graveyard is a symbol of knowledge of the turbulent past and sacrifices of those who lost their life while grappling with atrocities unleashed during the militarized conflict in their homeland. The particular incident referred to here is one around which the story "The Last Song" is woven—"That Black Sunday when a young and beautiful singer sang her last song even as one more Naga village began weeping for her ravaged and ruined children." (Ao, *These Hills* 33)

One notices a certain anxiety in the writer about preserving an aspect of their experience that seems to be fading away with time. She uses the mode of story-telling to reinstate those memories and make them available to subsequent generations. In the narratives of conflict, there is a pressing need to concretize past struggles and preserve memory. Fiction then becomes a source of creating parallel historiography, where events are worked out objectively and truth shines forth. The process of transition lays bare anxiety about this need to memorialize and preserve the experience of the collective struggle of the Nagas.

Additionally, 'transition' and the allied framework of past and present bring up the question of tribal customs. Self-determination is at the centre of conflict and indigenous culture is crucial to identity. Culture comprises beliefs, practices, celebrations, language, narratives and songs of a group of people that capture the emotion and ethos unique to a group of people. These elements serve as a binding force. People are knit together in a framework of shared values. And it is this shared aspect of experience that a community holds on to in times of collective crisis.

In case of Northeast India, assertion of culture is of particular importance as its representation strikes at the root of the stereotypical image of the region constructed around conflict. This part of the country has come to be defined, as it were, by violence, unrest and instability. Insurgency and the counterinsurgency operations have become the only lens through which the region is viewed. And this limited approach of viewing people is problematic. Temsula Ao's fiction sufficiently addresses this concern and seeks to undo it, even as it engages with the compelling reality of resistance in the region. Her

narratives forge a parallel image of Nagaland where its people, their character, beliefs and habits come alive. Representation of culture then serves as a political tool in the hands of the indigenous writer for asserting that which often gets obliterated by the discourse of politics or conflict.

There is also a flipside to the way cultures and traditions operate in such cases. As evident in the recent developments in the region, men are having recourse to tradition in order to protest against 33% reservation for women in the local body polls.<sup>3</sup> While in one case tradition strengthens the contemporary discourse of identity, it is the same parameter that acts as a hindrance to the movement forward of the very same people. Even as past is an important feature in understanding and shaping one's present, an uncritical adherence to its diktats is problematic.

### Exploring Insurgency during Conflict

Naga insurgency, one of the issues pertinent to the political context of Tamsula Ao's fiction, began as early as 1946 with the formation of Naga National Council (NNC). This group rallied for rights over their land, including legislative and executive powers; a denial of the same, fuelled the desire for Naga independence. Second major event in the Naga insurgency was the Shillong Accord of 1975.<sup>4</sup> This caused a split in the movement and gave rise to opposite outfits within the Naga rebel movement- NSCN (K), that is the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) and NSCN (IM) where IM stands for Isak-Muivah. The separation was based on differing views of the leaders Thuingaleng Muivah, Isak Swu and S.S. Khaplang.

Along with the existence of local rebel movements, counterinsurgency operations by the Indian State added another dimension to the conflict in the Northeast. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958) is the case in point. The government deployed army in the region to curb insurgent activity. But the act raised more issues than it solved. In extreme situations, the said act granted immunity to army personnel that gave rise to incidents that people in the region strongly opposed. Further, the army's presence in the state was a blow to people's constitutional rights. What were the special powers granted to the armed forces? This can be understood by a statement of the Manipur MP in 1958 Sri. L. Achaw Singh. He said, "This is a black law...How can we imagine that these military officers should be allowed to shoot, to kill and without warrant, arrest and search? This is a lawless law." (qtd. in Naorem 5)<sup>5</sup> The exercise of power by this state machinery brought to light some instances where common people were victims of questionable conduct of the army personnel.

Scenes of violence, both from the government and the insurgents are present in Tamsula Ao's narratives. Under attack are the forces that curb freedom, free expression and peace:

The subject of independence became public talk; young people spoke of the exploits of their peers' in encounters with government forces and were eager to join the new band of 'patriotic' warriors to liberate their homeland from 'foreign rule'. (Ao, *These Hills* 3)

This quotation from the story "The Jungle Major" highlights one of the most essential sentiments behind insurgency in the region — the feeling of alienation. The words 'foreign rule' and 'patriotic' are striking and convey the exact sentiment, giving rise to insurgency. Nagas did not associate with the idea of 'India' and felt like outsiders. The government's presence felt like "foreign rule". Further, it also brings out the absence of belonging to the Indian nation and reflects on the sentiment evoked in people due to the way they are

treated by the powers that be that it felt like 'foreign rule' even as they were in their own land. This has resulted in a movement for self-determination giving rise to a situation of confrontation between the national army and the group of Nagas who resolved to organize themselves for the 'cause'. In the above excerpt Ao refers to them as 'patriotic warriors'. This elaborates on the demand of Nagas for a separate nation of their own. Tamsula Ao brings out this context in this story and others.

At one point while Tamsula Ao depicts insurgency from the perspective of the Naga natives, highlighting the source of such feelings, another approach adopted by her depicts insurgency and the conflict from the perspective of common people. Her fiction makes us aware of three broad categories of people and the three different standpoints from where conflict can be understood. These three groups are the insurgents, the authorities and the common people. While these narratives acquaint us with the discourse of the organized outfits of people who demand independence of their land, at the same time a parallel understanding of this reality emerges from the text. The insurgents demand a separate state so they may live as a community without any apprehension of their interests being compromised due to an over-arching narrative of the nation. They seem to be working in the interest of their own people. However, the means that they deploy is quite ironic to their avowed motives.

People whom they are fighting for are the ones who have to face the brunt of daily violence. In particular, their mode of tax collection comes to light in the narratives. In the story "The Letter", the narrator states, "Such acts of blatant extortion from the so-called 'national workers' was not a new thing for the simple villagers" (Ao, *Laburnum* 55). And those who fail to comply with this demand, for whatever reason, are met with violence. In this case then, these groups fighting for the cause of their people, against a universalizing narrative of the nation, are they not themselves giving rise to an order that is against their own demands? These scenes of violence evoke a sense of horror. What is at stake in a circumstance infested with torture and destruction? Innocence, faith, sense of security, harmony, and capacity to feel for fellow men is sacrificed in the face of such brutal atrocities. Basic conditions for leading a fruitful life stand sacrificed. One wonders then that progress, for which the insurgents are fighting, can it be ever achieved under such sub-human circumstances? These questions seem to arise as Ao's fiction paints a gruesome reality of humanity being slaughtered at the altar of violence and conflict.

### **State and its Contentious Role in Conflict**

State and its various forms come under scrutiny in Ao's fictional representations. The army, police and the government are some structures whose activity is represented in her stories. One of the first is the security force deployed by the government to keep what they call 'rebellion' in check. They are always curious for any information about the hideouts of the underground army or their activities. Any leads into that help them 'tame' these people working against the government. Even as this is done in the interest of the country, the measure adopted for the same make one think twice about such undertakings. In the story "The Jungle Major" a view of the violence unleashed by the authority is mentioned:

Some villages to which the underground leaders belonged were severely punished. The houses were ransacked by the security forces, the grain in their barns was burnt...numerous stories proliferated of women being molested by the security forces and the obstinate ones who refused to give information being severely beaten. (Ao, *These Hills* 3)

Here we notice the manner in which power goes rough shod on people, exposing the sheer irrationality of the way these structures operate. What is happening here is that violence is being perpetrated on those who are merely apprehended to be 'linked' to the underground forces. By attacking innocent people, an atmosphere of trauma and fear is perpetuated amongst people; terrorizing them and making them comply to the whims of those wielding power.

What is the threat felt by the authorities with existence of such outfits as the underground in the Northeast? Is there any harm that these groups are causing? First what comes to mind is the violence perpetrated by these groups towards government, in the form of attacking army men. However, at a larger level, such groups embody dissent, which is a bigger threat to the powers that be than physical attack by people from the underground. In the case of the Nagas the challenge posed to the authorities is in the form of self-assertion and a refusal to accept the universalizing discourse of a unified 'nation' whose dynamics are defined by a handful few at the center. Or is it the anxiety of the minority of losing their identity and getting subsumed in the larger national rhetoric? While she captures the atrocities of the Indian state and the local rebels with equal insight and intensity, one may wonder about Temsula Ao's own standpoint. She seems to side with the exploited, hence adopting a humanist stance. In the story "A Simple Question" the narrator says, "Very soon entire land was gripped by terror unleashed both by the underground forces as well as the government soldiers." (Ao, *Laburnum* 83) The picture of trauma and atrocities presented by her has an immediate impact on the reader, making him/her feel one with the victim. Her sympathetic portrayal of the exploited is further substantiated by the fact that she presents common folk as victims of both the army and the government.

### **Ao's Humanist Standpoint**

A precedent of Ao's humanist approach lies in the objective portrayal of violence in her stories. She explores the impact of violence during conflict on both, the victim and the perpetrator. The narratives seem to convey that brutality unleashed during conflict inspires sub-human instincts which at times shock even the perpetrator. In the story "The Last Song", from the collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a Warzone* (2005), the army Captain who brutally rapes the young girl Apenyo and her mother, is himself found in the mental asylum as the narrative draws to a close. Similar predicament is depicted in the story "A Simple Question", from the collection *Laburnum for my Head* (2009). Imdongla, the young woman in the story asks the head of the army, "What do you want from us?" With this question he is visibly perturbed. The narrator says, "...the illiterate village woman had managed to unsettle his military confidence by challenging the validity of his own presence in this alien terrain" (Ao 87).

Temsula Ao also displays faith in human courage- people's capacity to take charge and stand up against anti-human forces. In her short fiction she envisions people of the region along political lines, waging a struggle against both - the terror outfits and the homogenizing government forces. She envisions these peace loving people as becoming politicized, involving them in freedom and emancipation through fight along lines of humanist collective. In the story "A Simple Question" an illiterate woman, Imdongla, opposes army's act of whisking away her husband and other village elders merely on suspicion that they help insurgents. She goes to the army camp where they are held captive and openly questions the army personnel about their unjust act. On a larger level, Ao envisions the entire community organizing themselves against the oppressive



forces. This is evident in the story "The Letter" when the entire village gets together, forms a human wall and beats up the insurgent who had come a second time to demand money from them. (Ao, *Laburnum* 57)

### **The Aesthetic of the Conflict Narratives**

The aesthetic of a literary text is an essential parameter of understanding politics inherent in it. The mode of narration, emphasis, silences, gaps, contradictions, and other such devices together help a discerning reader arrive at an understanding of the standpoint from where the stories are written. Ideas are concretized when they are expressed in the written mode and the particular way of putting across a point conveys the dynamic inherent in it.

Let us begin by defining the aesthetic in fiction. One can say that the aesthetic is a feature that controls and disciplines a work, tells it where to begin, which direction to take, what to choose, and emphasize. It also involves elements deliberately kept out of the narrative or discourse. Omissions, ironically, also contribute to an emphasis of that which is opposed, criticized or rejected. In the case of Temsula Ao, her narratives always begin with a reference to the particular experience of a character. Day-to-day incidents in the life of her characters are at the center of her narratives. We never find mention of any historical figure of national importance. Instead she sees heroism in common people's lives as they confront brutal realities. In the story "The Last Song", from the collection *These Hills Called Home* (2005), the young girl Apenyo's courage is unprecedented. It shines forth on the occasion when the security forces attack a congregation of villagers. They had gathered to celebrate the inauguration of a new church in the village. Apenyo is the lead singer in the choir. But the brutality unleashed thereafter is hair-raising. As the army interrupts village celebrations, the narrator says:

Apenyo stood her ground. She sang on, oblivious of the situation as if an unseen presence was guiding her. Her mother...saw her daughter singing her heart out as if to withstand the might of the guns with her voice raised to God in heaven. (Ao 28)

Apenyo's uninterrupted song is seen to "withstand the might of the guns" (Ao, *These Hills* 28). The army which disrupts the celebrations is met with courageous resistance of first the young girl Apenyo and then the entire choir, who joins her song. The choir bursting into a song, with a reignited passion in the presence of the army dramatizes a dialogue that occurs in the moment between people and the state representatives but involves no words. Singing comes across as the villagers' way of expressing their resilience in front of the army who announced their arrival with bullets.

Broadly speaking her narratives invariably move in a direction whereby freedom, courage, justice are celebrated and forces countering these values are looked at critically. This can be seen in the above sections discussing insurgency, violence, and humanism in her fiction.<sup>6</sup>

Conflict narratives are a powerful political tool, contributing to an objective analysis of the situation and bringing to the fore aspects of reality that may be hidden otherwise. Real-life circumstance is coupled with imagination and rendered in fiction. This mode of representation is immensely enabling.

Temsula Ao's short stories add another dimension to the idea of the aesthetic in conflict narratives. In her short-fiction, beauty lies in the moments of bare emotions felt intensely. This is a unique aesthetic of conflict literature that emerges in her short-fiction. Her stories bring the reader closest to the characters by means of detailing the felt-experience of the characters. The reader feels one with their predicament. The story "Old Man

Remembers", presents the predicament of a man who was part of the insurgent group, but has now retired. The narrator says, "Though he was making a valiant effort to lead a normal life as a common villager, he could not hide the inner turmoil from his wife who would shake him awake when he groaned and moaned and sometimes even shrieked in his sleep" (Ao, *These Hills* 94). At another point when he is recounting incidents from his days in the jungle as an underground soldier, the man is unable to control his emotions. The narrator says, "Young Moa immediately went to his grandfather and wordlessly put his hands around his grandfather's emaciated shoulders. This gesture further aggravated old man Sashi's sorrow and he began to whimper loudly in his grandson's arms" (Ao 97).

Ao's narratives comprise two parallel lines of thought—that of conflict, and the one where beauty of normal life is highlighted. Intensity of experiences other than those during conflict also comes to the fore. The sense of companionship between people, their joy and confusions, their preference for nature and harmony, struggle with life's circumstance, their courage and grit among others are aspects discussed. In a militarized society, aspects of life that persist despite conflict are where beauty lies. The descriptions of nature are particularly tasteful. In the story "Laburnum for my Head", descriptions of the beauty of the laburnum flowers are immensely appealing. Phrases like "the humble Indian laburnum bush erupts in glory, with its blossoms of yellow mellow beauty" (Ao, *Laburnum* 1), "And ever May...the laburnum tree...bursts forth in all its glory of buttery-yellow splendour" (Ao 20), are a delight for the reader for it evokes beauty in sensuous detail. Representation of the ordinary felt sensations interweave with violent ones to give a unique aesthetic form to Ao's short fiction.

As observed, Ao's fiction has an aesthetic appeal, while it also works out a perspective on the Naga conflict. The Humanist stance of the writer helps create an understanding of the issue whereby violence is denounced, no matter what side it is perpetrated on and by whom. Further, Ao's manner of engagement with the conflict experience brings alive heroism of common people in the face of crisis. While being politically educative, Ao's narratives carry an artistic quality that appeals to the reader's emotions and imagination alike. And the depiction of beauty and nature further contribute to the aesthetic appeal of Ao's short fiction. One can say that Ao's writings are as much works of art as they are political statements.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> From the essay "In Guerilla Zone: The Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim — Isak-Muivah", Namrata Goswami.

<sup>2</sup> Organized Naga insurgency, one of the issues pertinent in the political context of Tamsula Ao's fiction, began as early as 1946 with the formation of Naga National Council (NNC). This group demanded Nagas' rights over their land, including legislative and executive powers; a denial of this fuelled a desire for Naga independence. Active through 1940s and 50s under the leadership of Angami Zapu Phizo, NNC was a group majorly rallied the demand of a separate Naga nation. In January 1956, the Naga Hills District was declared a "Disturbed Area", putting it under the command of the Indian Army. And with its 'Disturbed' status, the Arms Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 became operational in parts of present-day Nagaland and Manipur.

<sup>3</sup> "In January, violence erupted in Nagaland as the tribal bodies protested the state government's decision to conduct urban local body elections and reserve 33% of seats for women. The groups

claimed the move disrupted tribal customary laws that are protected under Article 371 (A) of the Constitution. The protests led to a political churn and TR Zeliang stepped down as chief minister in February." (Saikia Arunabh. "As Nagaland prepares to review reservation for women in civic bodies, old fault lines surface"), November 4, 2017. From <[https://scroll.in/article/855672/as-nagaland-prepares-to-review-reservation-for-women-in-civic-bodies-old-fault-lines-surface#:~:text=In%20January%2C%20violence%20erupted%20in,\(A\)%20of%20the%20Constitution.>](https://scroll.in/article/855672/as-nagaland-prepares-to-review-reservation-for-women-in-civic-bodies-old-fault-lines-surface#:~:text=In%20January%2C%20violence%20erupted%20in,(A)%20of%20the%20Constitution.>)

<sup>4</sup> South Asia Terrorism Portal, managed by Institute for Conflict Management, mentions various facts about this historic agreement between the central government of India and the insurgents. The portal outlines following outcomes of the Shillong Accord: (1) The representatives of the underground organizations conveyed their decision, of their own volition, to accept, without condition, the Constitution of India, (2) It was agreed that the arms, now underground, would be brought out and deposited at appointed places. Details for giving effect of this agreement will be worked out between them and representatives of the Government, the security forces, and members of the Liaison Committee, and (3) It was agreed that the representatives of the underground organizations should have reasonable time to formulate other issues for discussion for final settlement. (From <[http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/nagaland/documents/papers/nagaland\\_a\\_ccord\\_the\\_shillong\\_nov\\_11\\_1975.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/nagaland/documents/papers/nagaland_a_ccord_the_shillong_nov_11_1975.htm)>)

<sup>5</sup> Sanjaoba, Naorem. AFSPA: A Law Review", Critical Quest, 2014, Delhi.

<sup>6</sup> "I hear the land cry,/Over and over again/ 'Let all the dead awaken/And teach the living/How not to die" Tamsula Ao begins her short story collection, *These Hills called Home: Stories From a War Zone*, with this epigraph. She mentions awakening of the dead and teaching those who are still living. These stories are set in a milieu with history of conflict. Such narratives serve the purpose of conveying a message to people in the present, learning lessons from past experiences of the community.

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# 'Folded in a Pocket': Negotiating 'Past' Texts for Same-Sex Desire between Women in Saba Dewan's *Tawaifnama* and Ruth Vanita's *Memory of Light*

AMRITA CHAKRABORTI

**Abstract:** This paper will attempt to analyse how two twenty-first century texts, Saba Dewan's *Tawaifnama* (2019) and Ruth Vanita's *Memory of Light*, (2020) negotiate with several other texts and literary traditions, in order to imagine, reconstruct, or place on record silenced narratives of desire between women. I would argue, that on the one hand, the stories that Dewan and Vanita seek to tell are tales that appear to be like something hidden in a pocket, lapped in the fabric of other narratives, having the power to unsettle established narratives when finally brought out into the light of day. On the other, they make us aware of the ways in which the past inhabits the present, as a lost utopia which we yearn for, or as silences that cannot be 'redeemed' from their violent erasure.

**Keywords:** Saba Dewan, Ruth Vanita, non-linear temporality, same sex love, haunting

'This was in the pocket. Thought you might want it.' She looks at me, her face masked, as I open it gently, trying to avoid tearing it. For a moment my mind goes blank, then something submerged surfaces- it's a sketch of Chapla. The paper is worn along the seams.

Ruth Vanita, *Memory of Light* (194)

Feminist and queer texts have repeatedly attempted to re-imagine the past, inventing complex lost worlds of pleasures and moments of resistance, as well as recounting histories of systematic oppression. As Judith Halberstam points out, a queer approach to cultural texts and records frequently calls for the deployment of "scavenger methodology," using gleanings from various disciplines to "collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour" (Halberstam 13). These explorations often straddle the realms of history and fiction, the line between "research" and "imagining," testing postmodernism's ability to "[put] into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past" (Hutcheon, 92). Thus, Kidwai and Vanita's pioneering *Same Sex Love in India* (2000) offers the reader gleanings from a variety of texts that refused to allow any simple disciplinary categorization, from Hindu epics, to court judgements. Moreover, queer imaginings are also invested in inventing a legacy that might or might not 'really' have existed. Thus, Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* is engaged in reminding us of marginalized histories of London in the late nineteenth century- the city's street life, its music halls and theatres, and its engagement with a nascent Socialist movement. On the other hand, it is also a fantasy about what *might* have happened- in the bars where "toms" congregate in the novel, for instance, which perhaps did not exist at all in Victorian England. If according to Jose Munoz, queerness can never be in the "now" but can be felt "as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality," (9) these texts are indeed deeply invested in the potentiality that the past holds/held out, that can be realized through our

imaginative interventions, even if such things never happened, or escaped the discipline of recorded history. As Wendy Brown, in her reading of Derrida's hauntology writes, "We inherit not 'what really happened' to the dead but what lives on from that happening, what is conjured from it, how past generations and events occupy the force fields of the present, how they claim us, and how they haunt, plague, and inspirit our imaginations and visions for the future" (150).

As Gayatri Gopinath's research on queer films of the Indian diaspora has shown, earlier canonical texts are often embedded within later queer texts. Thus, according to Gopinath, Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1993) evokes Chughtai's "Lihaaf," a text written fifty years before, in 1942, and Pratibha Parmar's *Khush* cites on-screen kisses from *Razia Sultan* (1983) and *Mughal-e- Azam* (1960) (111-113, 131-160). Moreover, one could claim that there exists a uniquely Indian legacy of queering feminine spaces that are expected to be spaces of seclusion and 'timeless' subservience to the imperatives of heteropatriarchy, which finds expression not only in well-known texts such as "Lihaaf" or *Fire* or in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century *rekhti* poetry, but also in a number of other lesser known texts which have garnered a more modest degree of critical attention, such as Shweta Narayan's "The Padishah Begum's Dream" (2011).

In this paper, I will attempt to focus on explorations of desire between women in the space of a *kotha* in a bygone era in two texts- *Tawaifnama* (2019) by Saba Dewan, specifically the chapter "Pyari and Zehra," and *Memory of Light* (2020) by Ruth Vanita. While the plot of Vanita's novel is centred upon the romance between Chapla Bai and Nafis Bai, two courtesans or tawaifs in a *kotha* in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Lucknow, Saba Dewan's account of the lineage of a matrilineal family of hereditary tawaifs, is a text that deliberately positions itself on the border of fact and fiction in order to respect the wishes of those upon who shared their experiences with Dewan in the course of her research (15). I will attempt to explore how these stories of same-sex love weave a system of inter-textual references so that these love stories are positioned into the liminal spaces that exist, as it were, in the crevices of other well-known texts. They would appear to function like the sketch of Chapla, folded and hidden away in the pocket of a well-worn dress, yet capable of unsettling the narrative when remembered and brought into the light of day once again. This coming to light, makes one abruptly aware of the voices that have been irretrievably lost. As Nafis realizes upon seeing the sketch of her lover, if Chapla were telling the story, "it would be almost entirely different from hers," since "[m]emory, that most perfidious of hypocrites, holds up not a picture but a mirror" (194). As I will argue, both texts, written in English, a language that is both a foreign tongue, and a quotidian feature in the lives of Nafis Bai and Dewan's interlocutors, are mirrors of the present, as well as pictures that seem to be drawn on an impulse to refuse a linear temporality as the plane on which to locate one's politics, and instead be "willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless" to use Elizabeth Freeman's term (xiii). The losses of the past cannot be made good, yet the past continues to haunt the present.

Vanita's *Memory of Light*, is set in a newly built capital of Awadh, the time span of the novel being roughly between Raja Chait Singh's rebellion against the East India Company in 1781 and the death of the poet Insha Allah Khan 'Insha' in 1817. The novel is structured by Nafis Bai's recollections of the romance she shared with Chapla Bai, a dancer from Benaras or Kashi, when both women were young. Through the course of the novel, the famous *rekhti* poets of the day, Insha, Saadat Yaar Khan 'Rangin,' and Shaikh Kalandar

Baksh 'Jur'at,' drop in and out of the *kotha*, and their verse, which so often deals with emotional and sexual relationships between women often in the same household, frames the relationship between Chapla and Nafis. *Tawaifnama*, on the other hand, traces the peregrinations of Saba Dewan, in her quest for finding out about the vanishing world of the *tawaifs* or courtesans of Benaras. However, her novel too, is a novel of 'comings and goings,' in and out of homes. Her relationship with her interlocutors straddles a continuum between being an audience granted by the ageing *tawaifs* to a visitor/patron and the sharing of personal and domestic concerns with a friend whom they look after and protect. Indeed, Saba Dewan herself, functions as the one 'real, historical' character in the narrative, like the 'real' poets in Vanita's fictional world. Indeed, in a sense, *Tawaifnama* and *Memory of Light*, are texts that negotiate with previous texts by these authors, drawing upon a world which they have explored for the purpose of creating texts quite different from these- in Vanita's case her scholarly work *Gender, Sex and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry 1780-1870* (2012) and in Dewan's, her 2009 documentary *The Other Song*.

If *rekhti* is non-mystical poetry invested with the stuff of everyday life, articulated by a female speaker, and often set in a household, exploring the life that takes place in the "bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom," as well as "the market and the street," then in this fictional world, inspiration for the male *rekhti* poets, often comes from the doings of this particular *kotha* (Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City*, esp. 1-5). Like Chapla and Nafis' love poems going back and forth between the two of them, the roles of the 'source of inspiration' and the 'inspired' keep shifting between the poems and the dwellers of the *kotha*. Thus, in Nafis' narrative, Mir Insha's poems about Chapla Bai's dancing at the English kings' birthday celebrations or Dulhan Jaan's wedding, poems heavily invested in providing details of the finery on show, are woven into her own memories of the details of the costumes that she designed for these occasions ( Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City* 193-194; *Memory of Light* 94-99, 122-128).<sup>1</sup> Nafis' role, as the designer of these costumes, is not exactly that of a muse, but rather that of an artist whose work is woven into the text of another artists work. Indeed, in this light, Insha's work occupies a continuum between Nafis' use of her mother's old *peshvaz* in a costume for her sister, or the copying of Nafis' designs for costumes onto different colour combinations by Mattan Apa's *kotha*, a rival establishment, and the final cutting up of these clothes by a beggar woman (Vanita, *Memory of Light* 57-58, 194.)

However, if the poets of the day find 'copy' in the *kotha*, Nafis and Chapla also take their poetry and make it their own through their intimate conversations and performances. Given texts, exist in order to be played with. Such as Rangin's *sarapa*, or head to toe description of a dancer, described as a *pari* or fairy-faced one. Perhaps reminded of the last couplet of Rangin's poem, ("The tips of her toes are 'colourful,' Rangin/ Truly she's an incomparable fairy") upon seeing Chapla paint her toes, Nafis plots in order to get Chapla to dress according to the details of the dancer in the poem, without letting her know which text she plans to sing as an accompaniment to Chapla's dance, getting her to wear the appropriate jewellery and trying to make her wear the appropriate colour, red (Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City* 197; *Memory of Light* 62-64). Departing from the text, however, Chapla wears orange, which is "close enough to red," while Nafis wears red. Nafis' plan weaves together the public and the private, using the opportunity of paying a public compliment to Rangin by performing his verse in a public gathering at his house, as a pretext for the pleasures of a joint performance with the object of her secret love, in the context of a *mushaira*, where romance is made manifest through the public performance and appreciation of poetry, song, and dance. Similarly, the fish-shaped earrings lent to

Chapla to wear are at once a public compliment to the city at Chapla's first public performance in Lucknow, as fishes were the emblem of the state of Awadh, as well as being a staple of descriptions of Krishna in Sanskrit and Braj poetry, but for Nafis they have a private significance as well, because she had worn them with a red dress, the first time she saw Chapla (Vanita, *Gender, Sex and the City* 197-199; *Memory of Light* 62-68).

By building up a narrative in which the poems are transformed into performances, snatches of conversation, or events that 'really happened,' Vanita's novel refuses the notion of any moment of origin. In the middle of rehearsals for the entertainments being put up at a wedding, for example, then arises an episode in which bodices feature prominently. Nafis' sister Shirin finds the bodice made for her too tight in the sleeves, while the cups are too loose, and complains about the poor workmanship of the household *Mughlani*, or seamstress. She flings it, aiming at the *Mughlani*'s head. Chapla and Nafis slip away from this scene, but *Mughlani* comes in with Chapla's bodice, which Chapla tries on, catching and throwing a ball with one hand while tying the bodice strings with the other. Chapla says that the bodice is too heavy with embroidery, and "pricks her," upon which Nafis gives her one of her own, made with *shabnam* muslin, embroidered with stars. *Mughlani* says, "The stars will sink in this one," to which Nafis replies, "Yes, both kinds of stars." (Vanita, *Memory of Light* 96-97) This passage is a clever working together of a number of interwoven texts. Descriptions of women's clothing, especially a beloved woman's clothing, and the presence of a *mughlani* are prominent features of a number of extant *rekhti* poems (Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City* 57-69, 97-110.) Every single one of the details described above are present in Insha's poem "Chubti hai yeh nigodi bhari angiya" ("This wretched heavy body pricks me"), a verse made famous as the opening song in Shyam Benegal's *Mandi* (1983). A still from the film, in turn, features on the best known cover for the hard copy of Vanita's *Gender, Sex and the City*, within the pages of which, the full text of the poem has been quoted and analyzed. But even if we limit the number of texts involved here to two, Insha's poem, and *Memory of Light*, we are not allowed to imagine an original text. Was Insha inspired by Chapla and Nafis or were Chapla and Nafis acting out the scenes they had read in Mir Insha's poem?

Reading *Tawaifnama* as a companion text to *Memory of Light*, one wonders perhaps this world of playing with texts is a particularly important aspect of the courtesan's professional practice. As Vidya Rao points out, the *thumri*, the most crucial part of a *tawaif's* repertoire from the nineteenth century onwards, is a genre where the performance of a piece provides a musical space or *jagah* for a feminine voice "by playing with ambiguities, meanings and...use of humour" (WS31). Rao points out how the temporal schema of the performance of a *thumri*, allowing varying reiterations of the same phrases which lend themselves to varying interpretations, create ambiguities about the identity of the audience to whom the speaker addresses her song, allowing for the creation of various kinds of *bhav* even in a single performance, and for a subversive blurring of *raags* that 'purer' genres eschew. Pyaari's older sister Bindo, is instructed about expressing the various moods that the words of the *thumri* can be imbued with:

"While performing bol banao thumri, it should be a singer's aim, Jhandey Khan stressed, to evoke as many different shades of meaning as can be read into the text through melodic elaborations and judicious use of ornamentations. He would demonstrate to her how the simple phrases in thumri - for instance, *baju band khul khul jaye*; my armband keeps coming undone - could be repeated many times over, each time emphasising different moods, such as amorousness, love, anger and even devotion." (Dewan 261)

Later in the novel, Pyaari shuts her *kotha* to her patrons for a few days to spend time with Zehra, and one evening dresses up and performs a *mujra*, solely for Zehra. When Pyaari sings *baju band khul khul jaaye*, playing with her armband, Zehra takes her in her arms, removes her jewellery, and begins to make love to her (Dewan 493). Zehra had earlier told Pyaari, whose direct audience were mostly male patrons, that most of her radio fans were women (Dewan 493). Pyaari and Zehra's love thus seems offer a glimpse of a queer utopia in which circuits of appreciation, desire, and romance between women are acknowledged.<sup>2</sup> In doing this, their experiences seem, in a complex temporal scheme, (since Pyaari and Zehra were friends in the early years of Independence,) to take on the contours of the iconic film *Utsav* (1984,) based on the second century BC Sanskrit *Mricchakatika*. In the film Charudutt, the bramhin merchant (played by Shekhar Suman) and Vasantasena, (played by Rekha, a queer icon in her own right,) the famous courtesan, begin their affair when Charudutt helps Vasantasena to take off her jewellery. But with Zehra replacing the male lover, Dewan's narrative also brings to the fore, the unspelt romance between Charudutt's wife, Aditi, (played by Anuradha Patel) and Vasantasena, in the extended sequence in which they sing for each other, and exchange jewellery and clothes, in a closed room.<sup>3</sup> *Utsav*, is an interesting parallel text to "Pyaari and Zehra," since both narratives are about a husband, his wife, and a courtesan and about their individual relationships with each other, as well as about the heterosexual couple's negotiation with the sexually transgressive 'public' woman in their lives. Like Vasantasena, in *Utsav*, Pyaari ultimately feels compelled to leave Zehra and her husband Ausaf.

However, like Chapla eluding Nafis' plans to make her wear red to Rangin's house and wearing orange instead ("close enough to red") or the question of whether the two of them ought to be the meeting of the Ganga and Gomti, since they are from Kashi and Lucknow, rather than the Ganga and Jamuna, the commonly used metaphor for harmonious meeting, especially in the context of Hindu-Muslim communal harmony, (Vanita, *Memory of Light* 64, 135) the story of Pyaari and Zehra also departs from *Utsav*. In Karnad's film, after various tribulations involving Vasantasena, Charudutt, and Aditi, the *savarna* couple are allowed to return to their home in peace, following a change of political regime. In *Tawaifnama*, Zehra and Ausaf are always viewed with suspicion by family, neighbours and colleagues for being Muslims and communists, which indirectly leads to Ausaf's death, caused by alcoholism, and Zehra's death soon after, from "unspecified causes" (Dewan 496). When Ausaf turns up to take Zehra back, claiming the Pyaari wanted to traffic his wife into sex work, he breaks up the budding solidarity between two marginalized identities in independent India, the Muslim intellectual and the Muslim tawaif.

These departures from the previous text, I would argue, serve to extend the reach of the previous text as it were, and acknowledge the spectre of the past in the present. Even if Nafis lives in more tolerant times in which her family understands what is going on between her and Chapla, and her friends can openly discuss the reasons why things did not work out between the two, the text also points to factors which the characters fail to discuss, such as the fact that while the courtesan household allows queer relationships to flourish, heterosexual patronage, or at least the company of men is what keeps *kothas* going, providing both economic support as well as heterosexual procreation that ensures that *kothas* survive into the next generation through the birth of girl children. Moreover, even if no one raises any questions about this, Nafis and Chapla both settle down with long term partners from their own religions. If they could compare themselves to the meeting of the Ganga and Jamuna in their youth, as if they were *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb*



incarnate, in later years, Nafis stands waiting on the threshold of a temple, while Chapla is inside, praying for a child (Vanita, *Memory of Light* 135, 182). The fictional past, created by a contemporary author, seems to raise the spectre of the 'present' in early nineteenth-century Awadh, with talk of Ahalya Bai rebuilding temples in Kashi, sounding like a very faint echo of bloodier temple-buildings in the early twenty-first century (Vanita, *Memory of Light* 88, 201).

This 'extension' of the text being quoted from, as in the case of *Utsav*, can also be used to critique an existing discourse by quoting from it. 'Pyaari and Zehra,' in my opinion, uses small details to critique an existing discourse about Indian feminist engagements with female sexuality in the mid-twentieth century. In *Pyaari Khala/ Saba Dewan's* narrative, Zehra is an acquaintance of Ismat Chughtai and Rasheed Jahan, and other Progressive writers. Indeed, her character would seem to be inspired by them, with her roots in an upper class, 'forward looking' Muslim family based in UP, her feminism, her simplicity of dress, her sharing of Rasheed Jahan's communism, and of Jahan and Chughtai's use of a language spoken by women in their writing (Dewan 477-478). Moreover, Zehra's choice in supporting her husband's politics and being a comrade and an equal as well as a wife, is reminiscent of the strong, companionate marriages that Chughtai's and Rasheed Jahan's own marriages appear to have been (Jalil, Paul Kumar and Saadique). This heterosexual but revolutionary departure from the orthodox marriages expected of women of their social background, has played its part in these writers being seen as women whose lives are an inspiring alternative to the lives of other Indian women, who were, in Chughtai's own words, compelled to suffocate under the *lihaaf* or play Holi with their own blood on Faras Road (Chughtai, *A Life in Words* 42).<sup>4</sup>

As Priyamvada Gopal has pointed out, an important aspect of the work of prominent feminist writers associated with the progressives, Rasheed Jahan, Begum Hajrah, and Chughtai, is the exploration of interactions between educated middle class women, with some access to the position of the citizen-subject, and women who constitute the Other for them. Gopal, in her analysis of Rasheed Jahan's works such as "Woh" and "Mera Ek Safar," points out how the texts often contain internalized misogyny to what is perceived as feminine ignorance unrelieved by education, as well as moments of rupture in which the voice of the often physically repulsive Other, can be heard over and above a narrative woven with the strands of the educated woman's experience, so that educated woman's as well as the reader's assumptions can be sharply challenged (Gopal 39-64). Saba Dewan's text is at once a critique of the oversimplifications about women who cannot be co-opted into a narrative of modernity, that even women writers have made about women like Pyaari and her nieces, as well as a furthering of Rasheed Jahan's project of critiquing her own position as the harbinger of knowledge and liberal values.

Chughtai's most famous short story *Lihaaf* is popularly celebrated as *the* first Indian text that boldly spoke about lesbianism in respectable homes and occasioned Chughtai's courageous defence of her right to write openly about the truths she felt patriarchy had chosen to ignore, when she was charged with obscenity in 1945. If the text itself operates in a darkly comic, almost amoral universe without judging, or perhaps even understanding what Begum Jaan does, or what makes her a frightening figure, Chughtai's recollections about the short story would seem to suggest that while she refused to apologize for writing about what she saw as the dark truths of a patriarchal society, a happy marriage was, in her eyes, far better than sexual relationships between women. Writing many years later, in the essay 'Un Byahataon ke Naam,' a chapter of her

autobiography, Chughtai would reminisce that the woman upon whom Begum Jaan had been based had, in later years, come up to her and told her that she was now happily married, and the mother “of a pearl of a son.” Chughtai, in her reflections upon this incident, writes about her own happiness, that the fate she had wanted for the Begum, had come true: “I felt fully rewarded when I saw her flower-like boy. I felt as if he was mine as well- a part of my mind, a living product of my brain, an offspring of my pen” (Chughtai, *A Life in Words* 21-42, 40). This narrative, for all the queerness of the pen-wielding woman author assuming a parental position as the ‘creator’ of the child (the child’s father is barely mentioned in the narrative) would seem, in its celebration of the resumption of heterosexual procreation and the birth of a male heir, to elicit the same comment that sums up the last story of hers that Zehra reads aloud to Pyaari: “Surprisingly conventional in its resolution for a story written by Zehra, it was redeemed by interesting characterisation and language” (Dewan 496). This last story, written after Zehra returns to her husband, about a man torn between his wife and another woman, who finally chooses his wife, is Zehra’s way of seeking closure for her relationship for Pyaari, and is thus similar to Chughtai’s use of her pen in “Un Byahataon Ke Naam” to delineate a distance between the writer and her experience of desire between women, testifying to her own ‘preference’ for the realms of conjugal heterosexuality.

Pyaari’s narrative of her heartbreak upon Zehra’s leaving, is thus a narrative that refuses to comply with Zehra’s or Chughtai’s need to diminish love between women to an ‘episode,’ that can be left behind. Along with being the brave descendant of Dharmman Bibi who fought in the *ghadar* of 1857, Pyaari also resembles the plucky, generous, women found in several of Chughtai’s stories who cannot afford to, or deliberately refuse to, tailor their relationships with men according to middle class standards of sexual morality and modesty. She continues to take male lovers, including the devoted Shambhu Lala who continues to visit her even on her deathbed. None of these ‘facts’ are allowed to detract from the importance that Pyaari gives to her relationship with Zehra, even as she continues to live with her usual resilience:

... you described your aunt as the quintessential tawaif - a survivor in love and life. Zehra had been the love of Pyaari’s life. Her betrayal left a deep mark, but it did not erode Pyaari’s faith in living. She lived fully and was open to love whenever it crossed her path, unlike Zehra who gave up on life after the death of her love, Ausaf. (Dewan 497)

Pyaari thus appears to partake of a ‘timeless’ ideal of the tawaif, an ideal handed down by the family of Dewan’s interlocutor, herself a survivor in love and life, as Dewan’s text lovingly chronicles. At the same time, Pyaari’s youth is carefully located in its precise historical circumstances. Yet, as Dewan’s narrative, by juxtaposing the stories narrated to her alongside a narrative of the present-day context in which she pieces together this history, shows, past and present cannot be demarcated along a linear trajectory. Aijaz, who interrupts Pyaari’s narrative, saying she is blaspheming as she lies on her death bed, has, like Ausaf, who interrupted the Pyaari-Zehra romance many years ago, had to negotiate with his religious identity in order to grasp where he stands in the world of Indian politics (Dewan 238). The politics of this haunting of the present in both novels is significant if we return to Wendy Brown’s reading of Derrida, cited at the beginning of this paper. As Brown points out, for Derrida, being haunted by the past is a condition that enables us to attempt to live more “justly”: “Justice demands that we locate our political identity between what we have inherited and what is not yet born, between what we can only imagine and the histories that constrain and shape that imagination” (Brown 147).

Both Dewan and Vanita's work involve an investigation of the inheritance that shapes our identities, as well as the limits of that inheritance, in the form of the silences that the writers cannot or will not redeem. On being interrupted by Aijaz, Pyaari Khala turns her face to the wall and refuses to go on with her story, despite the affectionate urgings of her niece and Dewan, who try to say encouraging words about "the beauty of the human spirit embodied in love," and how love between women is to be found among ladies in respectable *zenanas* as well as in *kothas* (Dewan 494). Although her niece gives Dewan further details of how the affair finally ended, out of Pyaari's earshot, Pyaari's version is left incomplete, never to be finished.

In *Memory of Light*, the interpretations of lived experience that are crucially missing are the texts of Nafis and Chapla's poems. As the feminine voice articulating same-sex love, Nafis, the one who, going by the logic of the plot of the novel, 'lives' what we know of as a world created through *rekhti*. As Vanita's scholarship has explored, while a number of *rekhti* poets have been neglected, others have made it into the canon of Urdu letters due to more 'respectable' contributions- Insha's reputation for instance, depends largely on his work on grammar and vocabulary, *Darya-e-Latafat* (Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City* 20-24). However, there exists only one extant text which may perhaps be written by a woman (Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City* 6-7). Nafis' experiences might be enshrined in Insha and Rangin's deathless verse, but her own verse, the unmediated expressions of her love for Chapla, and her own name, remain hidden, perhaps because it is not possible two centuries later, to presume to put words in her mouth. Insha's couplet, reflecting on the decline of his world, says:

*Āwāz bujh rahi jo du-gāna kī āj hai*  
*Inshā se ko'ī kah de ab is ka gilā kare*

The *du-gāna's* voice is getting quenched today  
 Tell Insha, someone, that he should lament this now (Vanita, *Gender, Sex and the City* 143)

Acknowledging the past is perhaps also an acknowledgement that the spectre of the past can manifest itself in the form of an absence that cannot be recovered, that there may once have been texts articulating loves that dared speak their names, but who live on now as silences.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All Rekhti poems have been cited from Ruth Vanita's *Gender, Sex and the City: Urdu Rekht+ Poetry 1780-1870*.

<sup>2</sup> The term queer utopia has been taken from José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed analysis of the scenes between Vasantsena and Aditi, please see Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* 104-105.

<sup>4</sup> *A Life in Words* is the Urdu translation of Chughtai's celebrated biography *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* (1988). 'Lihaaf' was first published in 1942 in *Adab-i-Latif*, a journal based in Lahore, the text cited for this paper is a Devnagari text found online on Abhivyakti.org.

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# Re-defining 'Can. Lit.' or 'Indian Writing in English'? English Writings and the Indian Diaspora in Canada

SWAGATA BHATTACHARYA

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**Abstract:** International travel and migration are a global development since the 1970s. That was the period when Indian writing in English began to emerge as a literary category. Though the term 'Indian writing in English' denotes mainly the use of English language as the medium of expression, in most of these works what was experienced was an interaction of the central characters between two socio-cultural environments, at times resulting in disillusionment in both 'here' and 'abroad'. Since the 1990s, most writings in English were centred on the Indian diaspora spread across the globe, preferably in the United States and the United Kingdom. The 70s was the time when Canadian Literature also witnessed the emergence of a body of texts written by 'immigrant' writers that is writers originating from the South Asian countries. This article would concentrate on the English writings of the Indian diaspora in Canada and try to locate their body of works – that is to say whether diasporic literature is a part of Indian Literature or whether they are considered to be a part of Canadian Literature and as a result whether the category and the boundaries of Indian writing in English have been re-defined by the Indian diaspora.

*Keywords:* Diaspora, Indo-Canadian Literature, SACLIT, community, ethnicity.

## Introduction

"So what is it like to be a woman, a South Asian, and a feminist in North America?

*What is it like to be a Canadian writer who was born and educated in India?"* (Parameswaran 351)

This question was once raised by Dr. Uma Parameswaran, one of the pioneer writers of Indian origin in Canada. Most writers hailing originally from India and settled in some First World country choose English as their medium of expression. Are diasporic writings considered to be a part of 'Indian Writing in English'? Indian diaspora will quite naturally opt to write in the English language, but do their works fall under the category of 'Indian' literature? The question is not easy to answer. Even if the Indian diaspora ceases to be a part of India socially or politically, emotionally it often remains attached to the original homeland. Another question that arises is that, if the works of the Indian diaspora are not part of Indian literature, under which category should they be placed? Are they part of the literature of the place which they presently inhabit? For example, in the context of Canada, are they considered to be part of Canadian Literature, or do they remain tagged as works by 'writers of Indian origin'?

In this article, I shall focus on the English writings of the Indian diaspora in Canada, in particular, since that has been my area of interest and research for quite some time now, and seek answers to these queries. To answer the question whether the works of the Indian diasporic writers are considered to be a part of Canadian literature, we must seek first the answer to the question what is Canadian literature?

### What is Can. Lit.?

Can. Lit. is the abbreviated form of Canadian Literature, made famous by the poem "Can. Lit." (1962) by Earle Birney. In that exemplary sixteen-line poem, Birney laments the lack of a proper identity of Canadian Literature which prevents it from getting recognized as one of the prominent literatures of the world, and it is shoved under the abbreviated term 'Can. Lit.' As a nation, historically, i.e. since European contact in the late fifteenth century, Canada has grappled with the crisis of a definite identity of her own. The famous Canadian critic Northrop Frye has pointed out in his seminal work *The Bush Garden – Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (1971) that the famous Canadian problem of identity is "primarily a cultural and imaginative question" (Frye i). The vastness, emptiness and ruggedness of the Canadian landscape and its bitter cold climate had left the white settlers bewildered. They were in awe of the terrain and everything associated with it – wild beasts and 'uncivilized', 'barbaric' 'Red Indians' and 'Eskimos', and that got reflected in the literature of white Canada. Before 1825, Canadian literary activities were restricted mostly to the publication of various journals on travel and exploration, and missionary activities. A few amateur poets published their works in journals such as the *Halifax Gazette* (1752) and the *Quebec Gazette* (1764) which published literary pieces. The first Canadian anthology of poems was published in 1864 under the name of *Selections from Canadian Poets* edited by Edward Hartley Dewart. By 1867, that is, the year marking the Confederation of Canada, other genres apart of poetry began to gain popularity. The notable among them were satires such as Thomas McCulloch's *Letters of Mephobosheth Stepsure* (1821-22), Haliburton's *Sam Slick's Wise Saws and Modern Instances* (1853), etc (New 34-60). By the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was no dearth of fiction in the form of novels, short stories and plays in Canada. However, Canadian critics as well as the writers themselves continuously pointed towards a crisis which has historically prevented 'Can. Lit.' from becoming 'Canadian Literature'. The root of this crisis lay in Canada's cultural history.

The cultural history of Canada has systematically and deliberately omitted and denied the non-Anglophone presence. Thus, the crisis which is being discussed is a predominant Anglophone crisis. The dominant English Canada has denied not just the indigenous population but even the presence of the French and their literature in Canada. The Francophone community in Canada has always alleged of being marginalized and forced to remain restricted to the particular province of Québec in Eastern Canada. The rise of Québécois nationalism and political unrest demanding better treatment of the French language and culture has dominated the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Canadian history. Such was the extent of unrest that the slogan for the 1860 *Mouvement littéraire du Canada* was <<vivez pour arracher le Canada à l'odieuse tyrannie anglaise>> (Live for snatching Canada from the odious tyranny of the English). [New 66]

As a result of this English supremacy, Canada has always remained a part of something – first, of the wilderness, then of the British Empire and North America, and finally of the global world. She could never establish a tradition of her own, she never had the time or the inclination to build up a 'social imagination' which would be purely 'Canadian'. When the British set their feet on the soil of Canada, they brought with them their civilization in the form of their culture, custom, habits, and technological advancements. None of these were purely 'Canadian' leading to the sense of insecurity – 'What is meant by Canadian?' The sense of rootedness to a space, the sense of community and leisure lead to the birth of community narratives such as epics, and drama. Canada

had no leisure for either of them. In Canada, the movie came too soon to let theatre flourish as a medium of entertainment. Canada became busy in building railways, highways, bridges and canals as her mind was obsessed with the idea of living up to the expectation. She was trying to meet a standard set by Great Britain, the motherland, on the one hand, and by the United States, with whom she was competing, on the other. Her literature, written in English, struggled to compete with the literatures of Great Britain and United States and imitated a prescribed model, and in the process ended up being termed as 'Can. Lit.' The only characteristic feature or prominent marker of 'Canadianness' was struggle against nature to survive. *Anne of Green Gables* (by Lucy Maud Montgomery published in 1908) stood out as a popular children's text, distinctly Canadian as it was a pastoral myth which established kinship with the animal and the vegetable world.

So far, I have tried to establish the point that Canadian literature itself is a problematic category. Nevertheless, within this category distinction exists between the writings of the 'Canadians' and the 'non-Canadians'. In this context, I am reminded of an incident about Bharati Mukherjee who was once told that since she did not grow up playing in the snow, she could not become a Canadian writer. (Parameswaran 86). The reason made little sense because hundreds of native Canadian writers born and brought up in the snow were never considered to be writers enough simply because they were not white. It is obvious then that racism alone determines and classifies authors into categories such as 'Canadians' and 'non-Canadians.'

### **The non-Canadian Can. Lit.**

It has always been a controversial topic – what prompts 'ethnic' writers in Canada to write and what do they write about. Critic Kristjana Gunnars' essay 'Ethnicity and Canadian Women Writers' talks at length on this issue. An ethnic writer is someone who identifies himself/herself with his/her ethnicity. Then, what does being ethnic mean to the person? Whom does he or she represent and for whom is he or she writing? If these three are determined, then the next step is the subject matter of the writer. Of these four, the most difficult part is the answer to the first question – what does being ethnic mean to the writer himself/herself? As the Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian writer Neil Bissoondath says

...to recognize the complexity, to acknowledge the wild variance within ethnic groups, would be to render multiculturalism and its aims absurd. The individuals who form a group, the 'ethnics' who create a community, are frequently people of vastly varying composition. Shared ethnicity does not entail unanimity of vision. If the individual is not to be betrayed, a larger humanity must prevail over the narrowness of ethnicity. (107)

Native Canadian writer Janice Kulyuk Keefer in her article "From Mosaic to Kaleidoscope" echoes the same idea when she says

...It is the task of the writer to situate herself off-centre from her own community in order to be able to critique as well as communicate what she knows of it....No writer, no matter how passionately she identifies with a particular community, ethnic or otherwise, can transparently and comprehensively project the views and voices of that community in her writing (228).

This leads to the conclusion that too much involvement with his/her community is detrimental to the interests of the ethnic writer because that creates a lack of objectivity and writing suffers as a result. An ethnic writer is always an object of curiosity and interest to the mainstream society. This precarious position has both advantages as well

as disadvantages. On the one hand such a writer can go a long way by writing anything as it is his/her exoticism that will sell. To look at it from another perspective, the community to which the writer belongs might feel betrayed. Controversial writer Bharati Mukherjee has exclaimed in several of her writings that in Canada she was always made to feel 'different'. In her essay "An Invisible Woman", Mukherjee expressed her anguish by stating that, "I cannot describe the agony and the betrayal one feels, herein oneself spoken of by one's own country as being somehow exotic to the nature"(33). By "one's own country" what Mukherjee meant is obviously not India (the land of her birth) but Canada (the place where she had migrated with her husband after marriage). The problem aggravated for her as she refused to be categorized as an ethnic writer. This is the basic problem for all writers originating from outside Canada. The question of acceptability in the mainstream society leads to the formation of these categories such as 'Canadian' and 'non-Canadian'. In the anthology *The Coloured Woman: Women of Colour in Contemporary Canadian Literature* (1994), Saloni Mathur recounted an anecdote that she was once encouraged by a Canadian journal to send "Anything, and we'll be pleased to publish it." (279). This is what Keefer feels to be a staged play where the ethnic writer plays a prescribed part, she is bound to exoticize her ethnicity in return for getting published and being accepted as a writer.

Even if there may be compulsions, it is a serious question whether a writer of non-Canadian origin does not have any desire to speak on his or her own ethnicity voluntarily. Several writers would say, "Yes". Otherwise, the term SACLIT would not have come into existence.

### Why SACLIT?

SACLIT is not just a term but a community itself. It is also the name of a book published in 1996 edited by Uma Parameswaran. The term originated in the 1980s. In 1982, *Canadian Ethnic Studies* brought out a special issue devoted to "the fictional remembrances of the Chinese, the Japanese, the Greeks, the Finns, the Ukrainians, to name only a few...."(iv). South Asian Canadian Literature did not feature anywhere. The response was the publication of *A Meeting of Streams* (1985) in whose introduction M.G. Vassanji stated – "The term South Asian is a self-definition of the kind just introduced. It implies much. It refers to people who trace their ancestry to the Indian subcontinent...South Asian Canadian Literature is perhaps best understood as a term of contrast – with 'mainstream literature'" (4)

Then came out anthologies such as *Shakti's Words* (1990) and *The Geography of Voice* (1992) featuring the works of writers of South Asian origin by clarifying

In the Canadian context, the term South Asian Literature denotes the writings of Canadians who trace their origins from one of the following countries – India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. It includes writers who have come directly to Canada from one of the South Asian countries, or indirectly by way of Britain or other erstwhile British colonies such as those in Eastern and Southern Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific Islands. (McGifford & Kearns i).

In her study, "South Asian Poetry in Canada – In Search of a Place", Arun Prabha Mukherjee observes, "It is interesting to note that the South Asian poet does not remain confined by national boundaries but seems to identify with the entire Third World, reflecting the sense of solidarity the Third World countries have come to share because



of their history" (Vassanji10). This sense of solidarity gives rise to a pattern which she defines as follows:

In so far as South Asian Canadian writers trace their origins to the Indian subcontinent, their works, if studied together, may yield certain recurring themes and patterns. What I am resisting here is the tendency in contemporary critical theory to categorize these writers a priori as resistant postcolonials, as subalterns and marginals. (30)

As a matter of fact, a South-Asian writer's text is bound to be 'different'. Himani Bannerji feels that a South-Asian text is "A text with holes for the Western reader. It needs extensive footnotes, glossaries, comments, etc – otherwise it has gaps in meaning, missing edges" (33). There is actually a latent desire to speak for one's own community and make it audible to others. This desire to be heard is not confined either to the community itself or to the others, but the diaspora wants to reach out to everybody all at once. Gunnars says, "It seems essential to human nature to maintain a culture: A spiritual, mythological, ideological, emotional, communal territory, if not a geographical one" (24). This is exactly the psychology of the Indian diaspora, which is always willing to retain contact with the 'homeland' and its culture. In fact, it prefers to be the spokesperson for the Indian community in Canada as well as the torch bearer of Indian culture there, initiating and carrying on a dialogue within it and projecting it to the mainstream Canadian community (Sharma 161-62).

The dilemmas of the diasporic writers are actually not to be solved. When they concentrate solely on their community, they are regarded as Indo-Canadian writers, and promptly placed inside a ghetto. Their creative work is not judged in terms of creative or artistic excellence. Again, it is true that despite knowing all these, diasporic writers tend to seek a kind of security within the ghetto of their own community. Uma Parameswaran says that "there seems to be something in Canadian structure that perpetuates ghettoization rather than co-existence" (143). In order to strengthen themselves, the South Asian diaspora, of which Indian diaspora forms the majority, tends to overlook its internal heterogeneity. For example, twice-migrants such as Shani Mootoo, Ramabai Espinet and Yasmin Ladha are not considered to be on a par with the 'authentic' Indians who have directly migrated to Canada from India. What I intend to say is that within the ghetto called South Asia, there is another distinction between dominant Indians and the twice migrants who originate from India but have spent a considerable time outside India before migrating to Canada. The language employed by Mootoo and Ladha speaks of the 'otherization' within the Indian diaspora in Canada. Shani Mootoo's "Out on Main Street" is a powerful short story which demonstrates how the twice migrants are made to feel inferior and doubly alienated than those who have directly migrated from the motherland and are considered to be the authentic bearers of Indian culture. The Indo-Caribbeans' and the Indo-Africans' cultural baggage prevent them from becoming enough Indians to assimilate within the Indian diaspora in Canada.

### **Indo-Canadian Literature**

From the discussion so far, we can form the idea that the position of the diasporic writers within Canadian Literature is peculiar. They share a relationship with their readers who are not only a part of the Indian community in Canada but at the same time Indians residing in India as well as the white Canadians of Canada. Hence whatever they write, they have to keep in mind the dynamics of the market and the question of saleability of

their books. As a result, the task becomes more and more difficult to be acceptable to a global audience while at the same time giving them enough fodder to feed on. Consequently, the diasporic writer has to pick and choose certain common themes that will appeal to the reader – nostalgia, sense of alienation, racism and discrimination faced in the adopted land. For women writers, gender discrimination and violence against women both within and outside the community becomes a common theme and it falls within the ‘horizon of expectation’ of the readers. Talking about the Indian culture, tradition and practices keeps the mainstream Canadian reader entertained while at the same time it allows the community itself to identify with the fictional characters. In this regard, what Rohinton Mistry says about the ‘immigrant’ writer’s subject matter in “Swimming Lessons” is the reality

Father said if he continues to write about such things he will become popular because I am sure they are interested there in reading about life through the eyes of an immigrant, it provides a different viewpoint; the only danger is if he changes and becomes so much like them that he will write like one of them and lose the important difference. (249)

We can, then, assume that it was Mistry’s conscious decision to stick to the Parsi community of Bombay and the Emergency period in India (1975-77) as the backdrop of so many of his works including *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), etc. Mistry has also said in one of his interviews

I think they (Canadians) feel that when a person arrives here from a different culture, if that person is a writer, he must have some profound observations about the meeting of the two cultures. And he must write about racism. He must write about multiculturalism. He has an area of expertise foisted on him that he may not necessarily want, or which may not really interest him. He may not want to be an expert in race relations. (Kambourelli 253)

For writers without any cultural baggage, the choice of his/her subject matter depends on the individual’s will but for someone who has a cultural baggage portraying any character is difficult. He/she has to always keep in mind that he/she is representing an entire culture. In her essay “I See the Glass as Half-full”, Uma Parameswaran says that academia must draw a line somewhere to define the term ethnicity. Otherwise portrayal of stock characters, stock situations and stock emotions will lead to the formation of a formula within which all diasporic works can be accommodated. In one of her interviews on the eve of the release of her book *Tell It to the Trees* (2011), Anita Rau Badami had said

Actually, when I was writing the book, I was just writing for the sheer pleasure of writing. Because I had a story that I wanted to explore, I had a bunch of characters I wanted to play with, and that’s why I wrote the book. I wasn’t thinking about an audience. It’s only after a book is done that I start wondering about who is likely to read it. Because you’re right, an audience here in North America is going to react to the book differently. And an audience in India will look at it differently. (i)

This shows that diasporic writers are well aware of two kinds of readers and two sets of responses to the same text. One response comes from the community situated in Canada and the other set comes from the original homeland, i.e., India. That is why the diaspora ultimately remains an extension of Indian Writing in English, no matter whether the writer is a ‘Canadian’ citizen or not. The characters they portray are mostly middle class/upper middle class non-resident Indians who aspire to become rich and successful in the new land. In this way, the Indian diaspora actually serves as the connecting link between the two lands and plays a crucial role in the development of both the nations – the

homeland as well as the host nation. Basically, in today's globalized world, it is really difficult for the diaspora to remain detached from its homeland. What the Indian diaspora does is to physically move between "here" and "there" quite frequently and without much restriction. Most often they do not want to return and try to compensate that loss in terms of financial aid. In this way, the diaspora has actually sponsored and fanned sentimentalism to the extent leading to fanaticism and religious terrorism with its financial support and nostalgic zeal to do something for the motherland.<sup>1</sup>

### Conclusion

Unlike the pioneer writers of the Indian diaspora in Canada such as Bharati Mukherjee, Uma Parameswaran or Vassanji whose works were not much available to readers in India, in today's globalized world, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Rau Badami or Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are widely known, read and popular even in India. The readership and the class of readers for whom the books are written actually determine the subject matter of the writer. In the 1960s and 1970s, the diasporic writers used to write solely for the diasporic community settled in the adopted land as the need was to focus on the community vis-à-vis the mainstream society. They need not pay any attention to the effect of their writings back home. However, Anita Rau Badami's or Jhumpa Lahiri's novels and stories clearly spell out that they are not only aware of the presence of a class of readers who are acquainted with their works but they write keeping in mind the possibility of sale back in India as well. Their markets have been created on the basis of their identities as writers of Indian origin and by this identity, they have definitely re-defined the boundaries of Indian writing in English. They are simultaneously the representatives of a particular community in their adopted homes and members of the Indian diaspora back home.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the context of Canada, the Punjabis founded the Ghadar Party in Vancouver in the early 1900s and sponsored revolutionary activities back in India. Since then, militant and extremist activities in Punjab have been sponsored by the Sikh diaspora in Canada culminating in the 1981 Air India Tragedy on the issue of Khalistan. There are several literary works also on this topic including Bharati Mukherjee's *The Sorrow and The Terror – The Haunting Legacy of The Air India Tragedy* (Ontario: Penguin Books, 1987)

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# Secularism under Threat: Reading Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*

ARPITA SARDAR

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**Abstract:** Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* foregrounds the deleterious outcome of fundamentalism in present-day India. For centuries, India has witnessed the communal violence based on rigid fundamentalism resulting in genocide, vandalism of properties, and various atrocities in terms of mental and physical being. The fictional discourse clearly exposes the fact that there is no place for multiple voices to co-exist in a society like ours. The paper is an attempt to explore the shrinkage of space in terms of thought policing in the field of academia by the atrocities imposed by Hindu zealots in modern India.

**Keywords:** secularism, extremism, freedom of speech, liberalism, inner turmoil, multiculturalism

Among other novelists in postcolonial era, Hariharan has taken up the issue of growing intolerance as her thematic concern and critiques the religious fanaticism that is exciting violence in the name of preserving culture. There are many horrific instances of fundamentalist violence across ages. Demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, Gujrat carnage in 2002, exodus of Kashmiri Hindus in 1990 and Godhra train burning in 2002 are some of the examples of religious intolerance prevalent in modern India. By taking university campus as the backdrop of her novel, *In Times of Siege*, Hariharan articulates the intrusion of religiopolitical aspects in academia, which poses a serious threat in free thinking. She herself stated in one of her interviews that plurality engages her and she wants to hear many voices i.e. a variety of issues. (qtd. in Dundoo n. pag.). In this novel, Hariharan has shown how academic freedom has been set at naught and the concept of a pluralistic society is thrown to the winds because of an upsurge of religious fanaticism. A heightened sense of fundamentalism is delineated in this work of Hariharan to prove that one has to adhere to certain set of beliefs and principles, and if they are not obeyed, one is subjected to severe opposition from the extremists. The religious fundamentalists make it a point to lay stress on everything that glorifies religion and religious practices. They keep on propagating the fact that true nationalism signifies the promotion of a particular religion. The raging right-wing religious zealots are hell-bent on silencing the dissenters and thus paving way for more and more intolerance and communal division. Here, Hariharan raises her concern about this very notion of religion influencing and shaping politics. The novel is a critique of the homogenizing notion of the forced religious and cultural fundamentalism in academia and its injustice towards the religious minorities. Religious zealots' ever-growing chauvinism spreads violence at large. In these circumstances, only some conscientious and courageous people come forward to question such actions either by voicing opinions or registering protests in the face of threats from

the power-seekers. The basic question that the book poses is whether India could sustain itself as a secular country under this scenario of increasing violence and intolerance.

In the novel *In Times of Siege*, the word 'siege' connotes a place which is obstructed from all sides and the besieged gets no route for an escape. "Siege is dealt with at two levels- the clamorous siege of the street and the quieter but far more dangerous siege of the mind, where the airing of prejudice has become almost acceptable" ("A Delicate Pen"). This refers to action on the street as well research in the archive. It is important to attend to the multiple sources of historical facts and explore their various meanings. History should be unbiased in its study as far as religious and cultural compulsions are concerned; it should be guided by a free thinking. What is disappointing is that severe obstacles are always set in the path of free thinking by very many forces and elements like religious fundamentalism and cultural nationalism. Hariharan has referred to the rising phenomenon of Hindu fundamentalism, but, as Monika Gupta says, "It applies to every kind of fanatic and fundamental following of any religion" (Gupta 104).

The protagonist of the novel, Shiv Murthy, is a professor of history at an Open University in Delhi. His life revolves around the university, that is, academic meetings, lesson modules, research work related to historical articles etc. Since his wife Rekha is in the US with their daughter, Tara, he lives all by himself in his home near the university. All of a sudden, his ward Meena, who studies at Kamala Nehru University, comes to stay with him with a broken knee. Meena is an independent girl who does not bother to inform her parents regarding her injury. As a matter of fact, she does not even hesitate to live with a quite unknown man. In addition to this, Shiv's otherwise tranquil life faces a storm when the cultural group called Itihas Suraksha Mancha accuses him of distorting history and historical facts. Shiv's module on Basava, the 12<sup>th</sup>-century saint-poet at the court of King Bijjala in the city of Kalyana, incurs the wrath of the self-proclaimed preservers of history. They begin blaming him for undermining Hinduism and portraying Basava as an ordinary person. Moreover, Shiv is also charged with exaggerating caste inequality in ancient India and with showing the Brahmins and the priests in a not-so-positive light. Things get worse when Shiv's department fails to provide moral support to him. Furthermore, he gets a call from the Head of the Department, who repeated the charge:

It seems implied that Basavanna's city, Kalyana, was not a model Hindu Kingdom. It seems you have exaggerated the problem of caste and written in a very biased way about the Brahmins and temple priests. And also you have not made it clear enough that Basavanna was much more than an ordinary human being. There are people who consider him divine, you know. (Hariharan 53-54)

Shiv has delineated Basava as a man who sought to establish an egalitarian society. As he showed, Basava tried hard to bring about a revolutionary change in society. Following the marriage between a Brahmin girl and a cobbler's son, the city of Kalyana became a place of agitation. People from conservative strata of the society burnt the city and Basava left the place in despair. Such a depiction of Basava excites an uproar among the upper-caste section of the people. At this juncture, Shiv gets perturbed at the "thought of confronting fists, threats, physical danger in any form at all" (Hariharan 55-56). Meena takes the lead in providing the much-needed mental support and strength to Shiv. It is due her constant support that he could stand firm and fight for his ideals. She works as a positive catalyst in Shiv's battle to create his own space. It can also be said that Meena is the official spokesperson of Hariharan. Despite having a cast in her leg, Meena possesses

the indefatigable spirit and extreme self-assurance in her ideals and beliefs. Meena, who is writing a thesis on the plight of women after the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, believes in a quote by the German theologian Reverend Martin Niemoller: "Speak up! Before it's late". Hariharan's novel reiterates this idea in some way or other. Meena inspires Shiv to take a solid stand, "Why pretend you are a professor if you can't stand up to someone telling you what to think? Shiv, do you imagine an ordinary man cannot be a hero?" (Hariharan 64).

Infused with a new determination, Shiv decides that he will neither apologise for his interpretation of history nor will he retract his lessons or views for revision. This new facet of Shiv is praiseworthy when he says, "The lesson does not distort history by any stretch of the imagination. And I will not apologize or explain myself to a group outside the university, a group of people we do not recognize as historians" (Hariharan 69-70). The Hindu zealots started maligning the professor in their own way of holding meetings, processions, newspaper articles, and so on. People like the president of Itihas Suraksha Manch and retired professor Shri A.A Atre makes use of this opportunity to occupy the centrestage of power and authority. This novel exemplifies how the battle between extreme culturalism and liberalism can create pressure on creativity like art, history, and culture. Politics of surveillance is potent enough to create violence in the civil society. In these trying times, Shiv utters, "Only a sanitized Basava is allowed to remain, a 'saint-singer', a singer with a saintly face. This toothless man is safe enough to be hung on walls, a bland calendar memory" (Hariharan 86).

It has often been found that academic writings which include historical and mythological figures, fall into a web of controversy. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasreen and artists like M.F. Hussain became refugees and faced ostracism because of their portrayal of sensitive subjects. In 'Silencing of liberal India', Pratap Bhanu Mehta opines that lack of stringent legal system, not-so-strong institutions and religio-political influence are to be blamed for this kind of attack in liberalism (Mehta n.pag.). In this context, it is to be noted that Shiv's case has a striking similarity with what happened with the eminent historian Romila Thapar. She had faced the ire of the so-called Hindu Right for not glorifying Hinduism and its cultural practices in ancient India. It is extremely crucial to quote what Thapar says about academic and responsible historical research:

Professional historical writing requires a critical enquiry that includes the application of historical methodology, assessing the reliability of evidence and drawing on logical argument in making casual connections. It differentiates between the invention of a narrative that fantasizes about the past and an interpretation that attempts to critically analyse the evidence. History is not an arbitrary narrative where myth can override facts. (Thapar n. pag.)

Opposed to Shiv is positioned Dr. Arya, having ideological affiliation with the Hindu Right. At the beginning of the novel, in one of the academic meetings, Dr. Arya posits his basic proposition that Islam and Christianity are foreign religions and they should be termed as 'invaders'. In his own words: "Our land has always been a temptation to greedy marauders, barbarous invaders and oppressive rulers. This invasion and resistance is three thousand years old. Lakhs of foreigners found their way to India during these thousands of years, but they all suffered humiliating defeat" (Hariharan 19).

This statement from Dr. Arya immediately focuses attention on Mrs. Khan, the secretary of the department. She becomes embarrassed at the complexity of her religious identity. This also impacts negatively on her usual struggles against gender disparity and class

distinctions. In his essay, "The Indian Identity", Amartya Sen has observed that essentializing a person by his religious affiliation eventually shrinks his other identities like gender, social strata, ethnicity, and caste. Sen further comments that it is not correct to brush aside a person's myriad identities for the sake of emphasizing a unitary identity. Inflexibility towards polyethnic identity can create intolerance and violence to other people. (Sen 349-356). To quote Sen:

Any classification according to a singular identity polarizes people in a particular way, but if we take note of the fact that we have many different identities - related not just to religion but also to language, occupation and business, politics, class and poverty, and many others - we can see that the polarization of one can be resisted by a fuller picture. So knowledge and understanding are extremely important to fight against singular polarization. (Sen n. pag.)

Shiv feels a threat to secularism and feels his vocation as a historian terribly questioned. The role of Meena in Shiv's crisis is highly commendable as she leaves no stone unturned to bring the positive change in Shiv's thought process. Being an activist, Meena gets the aid of her coterie of secular friends in the attempt to support Shiv's revisionary reading of history. They organise TV interviews, distribute leaflets and hold dharnas in defence of secularism. As Meena says, "The link between fascism and ugly faces of Hindutva unveiling themselves around us is the regimentation of thought and the brutal repression of culture" (Hariharan 101).

While the Arya camp is hell-bent on propagating Hindutva-centric ideologies, Meena's liberal camp, supported by organizations like the Secular Women against Patriarchy (SWAP), 'Forum against Hindu Terrorism (FAHT) and People's association of Secular Scientists (PASS), is fighting for the cause of religious and cultural plurality. One of the placards reads "STOP TALIBANIZATION OF INDIA" (Hariharan 147).

Meena's youthful enthusiasm compels Shiv to explore into the area of action which is a completely new characteristic persona for him. The novel very aptly captures the transformation from an ineffectual academician to a fighter who stands for his own basic human rights. Meena, a constant source of inspiration for Shiv, speaks with full determination when she utters, "You can't avoid a confrontation, you have to get the head to meet all of you. Even better, you have to confront this Arya. Ignoring him is not going to make him go away" (Hariharan 119). However, Professor Shiv could not avoid violence thrust on him. His room at the department got vandalised:

His room, his books, stripped naked. A sullied place, no longer anyone's refuge. His room has been pushed into no-man's land. The table and chairs and bookshelves are broken, the walls defaced. There are torn books everywhere, cupboard and files open-mouthed and in shambles. (Hariharan 130-131)

It is a matter of probe whether all the perpetrators knew the exact cause behind the horrible wreckage of a professor's room that they had carried on. Hariharan has rightly stated that it takes only the price of a mere meal to hire people for creating chaos which has nothing to do with their lives. History is used by these religious zealots to sow the seeds of violence in a civilized society. Historians at different times have often faced such attacks from religious and cultural groups and unpleasant controversies go on unabated. In India, secularism reflects quite an ambiguous and contradictory concept as both the fundamentalists and liberals propagate their own narratives. In 'The Crisis of Secularism in India' (2007), Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan and Anuradha Needham point to this phenomenon:



The Indian state has chosen to interpret secularism differently, it has undertaken the charge to ensure the protection of all religions. It therefore makes a huge investment in matters of religion, unlike any nation in the west - for example, by administering religious trusts, declaring national holidays for religious festivals, preserving the system of different personal laws for different communities, undertaking the reform of religious law, having secular courts interpret religious laws, and so on. This raises the problem of where the boundaries of state secularism are to be drawn. (Rajan and Needham 20)

Hariharan incorporates into the narrative an incident where the seeds of communalist ideologies become synonymous with everyday life. Shiv reminisces visiting Hampi, the capital city of Vijayanagar empire, of the fourteenth century. By the sixteenth century, the city was reduced to ashes by the Muslim Sultanates of the Deccan. Though Shiv was aware of the destruction of the city, he was not prepared for the scale of ruins. In Hariharan's words, "A city planned to flaunt its glory, intimidate the subjects into subjection. And all the grandeur, like its kindred great cities, invariably built on the blood and sweat of hovels swallowed up by time" (Hariharan 158). By witnessing such appalling wreckage, Shiv's companion, the Auto rickshaw driver, Suban started to feel terribly shaken of his religious identity. Suban had taken it on himself part of the guilt of the communal violence that the religious group with whom he gets identified had committed in the past. Because of his double-marginalization (lower class and Muslim) Suban feels the compulsion to vehemently condemn the acts of violence by the Deccan Sultanates. As an individual he has absolutely no role to play but in terms of group identity he feels connected and responsible for the destruction of the glorious Hindu kingdom. Thus the past with this kind of horrific actions will go on haunting the present as well bedevilling it. It is appalling to note how religious affiliation affects present everyday life and social interactions amongst people. With this encounter, Shiv could fathom that the dreams of our secular leaders of having a syncretic vision in a multicultural society got annihilated by religious intolerance and extreme fanaticism. Communal bigotry has demolished the ideal concept of a multi-religious country. It is evident "that the world and its multitudinous mysteries are reduced to precarious survival on a crude seesaw: saint versus leader, saint versus man, Golden Age versus Dark ages, Hindu versus Muslim, Hindu versus Christian, anti-Hindu, pro-Hindu. Secularist, pseudo-secularist, soft Hindu, rabid Hindu" (Hariharan 150).

Besides Meena's provocation, Shiv is highly influenced by his father's memory who was a revolutionary in the independence movement. Shiv's father went for a meeting in Indore but never returned. Shiv could never come to terms with the mystery of his father's sudden disappearance. To him, both his father and Basava stand for secular ideologies who do not believe in prejudices. Both wanted to change the conventional way of thinking and sought to effect a radical overhaul of the existing framework. While Basava raised voice against caste stratification, Shiv's father fought for independence and later his struggle continued to form a classless society. A true historian's mind should be open to new ideas and he should be flexible enough to accept the heterogeneity of truth rather than embracing the monolithic version of the past. As regards secular ideologies, the years 1168, 1962, and 2000 are all connected irrespective of the age and socio-political background. It is apt to quote Linda Hutcheon's statement,

In both fiction and history writing today, our confidence in empiricist and positivist epistemologies has been shaken. [Historiographic metafiction] problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here-just unresolved contradiction" (Hutcheon 106).

University is a place for individual growth and the nation's development where free thinking and the ability to exercise free expression should be practised. Knowledge must not be dependent on personal predilections which might distort and prejudice free-thinking. If political and religious agendas cast an influence on academic curriculum, creativity and imagination would face hindrance in some way or other. History and literature often come under the surveillance of the extremists because both the disciplines deal with narratives from and about the past and the present. They take it upon themselves to make arbitrary judgements on any form of art to serve their politicking. And they pounce on the authors and filmmakers if they deviate even a bit from their preconceived notions of history, community, race and ethnicity. The evolving history of mutual trust and respect, of the possibility of unity in cultural, religious and linguistic diversity get lost in the process. Rather, on the contrary, as Arundhati Roy laments, "that heritage of hatred and mutual distrust has been exacerbated, toyed with, and never allowed to heal by politicians. Over the past 50 years, ordinary citizens' modest hopes for lives of dignity, security and relief from abject poverty have been systematically snuffed out" ("Fascism alive").

Through the characterization of Mrs. Khan and the 1984 anti-Sikh riot survivor Jasbinder, Hariharan posits how religion, social class and gender coincide in fixing identity. The novel foregrounds the necessity of female subjectivity, the utmost importance of speaking out. Shiv's wife Rekha discourages him to take a stand in fear of the threat to her family. Moreover, Shiv's daughter, Tara shows her inclination towards religiosity and is upset by her father's critical approaches towards priests and religious practices. Meena is, however, a sharp contrast to the other female characters, defying the timidity and inhibitions ordinarily associated with her gender. She has the courage to dissent and instils the same spirit in others. She inspires Shiv to come out of his safe nook and fight for his rights. Meena had served as the inspiring spirit and prop for Shiv to come out and achieve true selfhood. The novel thus also charts Shiv's psychic journey from darkness to illumination. In Hariharan's words, "Once he throws away all safe crutches, he can truly walk in the present. Be free to be curious, to speculate; to debate, dissent. Reaffirm the value of the only heirloom he needs from the past, the right to know a thing in all the ways possible" (Hariharan 194).

It is worth analysing the fact that Meena's cast has been used as a metaphor. Though her leg is covered with a plaster, it does not prevent her mobility. On the contrary, an invisible cast is thwarting people in forming a unified nation in the garb of religion, caste and creed. The novel ends with Meena leaving the house of Shiv. He hands over his father's walking stick to her, freeing himself from his father's haunting memory. He is sure that the younger generation will preserve his father's secular ideas and Gandhian ethics. This act of Shiv metaphorically suggests that there is a hope of a tolerant and liberal nation in the future. Hariharan does not end the novel with a concrete conclusion; the novel leaves enough gaps and doubts in the reader's mind. In the battle between secularists and fanatics, it is left undecided who wins and who loses. It is more important to continue to fight against fundamentalism of all sorts, religious, intellectual, ideological and cultural. It is in this ceaseless negotiation and contestation that the triumph of liberalism can be envisioned. At the end, both the characters are freed from their respective casts. While Meena gets freed from her literal cast i.e. the plaster, Shiv can shrug off the haunting of his dead father. Shiv's massive transformation from a nebbish professor to an enthusiastic person runs parallel with the main theme of the novel, i.e. to question fundamentalism of all sorts, thereby emancipating and shaping free thinking.

*In Times of Siege* speaks of the marginalised and weaker sections of society, and more importantly looks forward to voices of protest from them, while looking askance at the silence of the intellectuals. Through her protagonist Shiv, Hariharan lays stress on the urgency to speak up for the vulnerable. The role of the media too has been taken into account to achieve the cause. Though life is shown to have suffered enough *sieges* at the hands of orthodoxy and fanaticism of all sorts and though the characters have experienced enough rifts, the novel ends with a celebration of life and free expression as its essence. *In Times of Siege* critiques the contemporary state of affairs when secularism is under the threat of collapse, but at the same time holds out the utopian concept of living in peace in a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society as a nation. It is to that goal that the book develops its courageous ideas, hoping that these ideas would also grip the minds of others. As Sehgal has once said, "Ideas have no life of their own; something has to be done about them or they languish for centuries with no impact on the living" (Sehgal 82). Therein lies the real need of a book that can make ideas aesthetically compelling and acceptable for us.

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# Writing Violence in Postcolonial Assam Ethno-Nationalism and Armed Insurgency in Contemporary Works of Fiction

ABANTIKA DEVRAY

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to study the unresolved conflict between the popular ethno-nationalist demand of ‘Swadhin Asom’ and counter-nationalist commands of the Centre in postcolonial Assam, by considering the effects of insurgent activities on common masses towards the end of the twentieth century. Primarily, the narratives of conflict in Aruni Kashyap’s *The House with a Thousand Stories* and Arupa Patangia Kalita’s *Written in Tears* shall be read using and critiquing Benedict Anderson’s ideas of the ‘nation’. Besides, reading academics from Assam – Nandana Dutta, Udayon Misra and Sanjoy Hazarika will help to contextualize and understand the political and social situation better as it prevailed in the Northeast.

**Keywords:** insurgency, nationalism, migration, homogeneous homeland, counter-nationalism

## I

“Armed rebellion in the North Eastern region is a medium – a language, a voice – to express their grievances... represents a mindset, a suppressed voice which is deeply engrained in Assam’s psyche” (Mahanta xv, xvi)

The idea of ‘one Indian nation’ which became popular during India’s freedom struggle, received many challenges in the post-independence period from India’s Northeast. On being suddenly relegated to the ‘margins’ of India’s mainland, the Northeast in post-independence era began to encounter problems of slow, uneven development and economic backwardness. Since many tribes and indigenous communities across the region had their separate and unique set of demands and problems, they wanted the creation of separate independent ethnic states which would represent their demands. They also refused to comply with the pan-Indianism which believed in the existence of a single, sovereign, democratic country and rather focused on their own brand of nationalistic fervour. This was soon assumed by extremist groups who also began to represent the people’s voice and their needs. In Assam, these demands were replicated and the foremost radical group was ULFA. In his essay, ‘Separatist Militants and Contentious Politics in Assam, India: Limits of Counterinsurgency’, Sanjib Baruah writes that even after three decades of militant nationalism in Assam, the appeal or attraction of insurgent politics is not reduced at all; in fact, as an ideology, the politics of ULFA is “more powerful than its actual operativeness” (953). He also points out that a political resolution between the Centre and the State still remains elusive.

That being said, I wish to draw attention to the eventual weakening of the promise and attraction of the ideology in Assam in recent years due to the ruthless violence, unleashed in the course of conflict between the nation-state and the militants. The body of literary works of Assam betrays a significant contradiction between chastising the violence of nationalism and implicitly approving of the ideology of militants, which demands a 'Swadhin Asom' with none of the problems that plague the region. This might also be taken to represent the view of most people in the state who struggle between the Centre's counter-nationalist diktat and the ethno-nationalism of the militants. The two texts that I consider in this paper – Aruni Kashyap's novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* and Arupa Patangia Kalita's collection of short stories, translated by Ranjita Biswas as *Written in Tears*, aim to look at the pronged attitude of the common man towards insurgency and its impact on them.

Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* considers the effects of militant nationalism and conflict in the everyday lives of people. Set in a remote village in Assam, Mayong – also the narrator and protagonist Pablo's ancestral village, it is narrated in a period of severe political and military strife in Assam. In the summer of 2002, Pablo visits Mayong to attend his aunt Moina *pehi's* wedding. Pablo lives in Guwahati with his parents and Mridul, his cousin accompanies him to Mayong. The past years of conflict between the separatist militant nationalism and the ruling Centre as a sovereign republic resurface in Pablo's narration, drawing upon his own reflections on terror and conflict. This conflict is a *leitmotif* throughout the story. Although he is relatively distant from it now, yet this troubled history never really goes away; it bears an indelible effect on his psyche as well as that of other common people in the state.

The story is irregularly set between 1998 and 2002 – focusing on the decadence that was gradually becoming a part of the social, political and cultural life in Assam. One of Pablo's relatives, Proshanto-*da* tells him that he must leave Assam and India once he had the opportunity, since nothing good could come out of remaining in a place where only violence has happened in the name of revolution. Proshanto-*da's* frustration at being deprived of advanced facilities and inability to get past the red-tape are only some of the examples of the problems that people faced in Assam in these decades. This is also the time when many young people joined militant nationalist groups with the dream of achieving independence from the Indian union. ULFA or United Liberation Front of Assam was thus formed in 1979 at Rang Ghar, seeking liberation or freedom of their motherland from "colonial" India. Initially, there seems to have been support to the cause and a certain pride in the young men who joined it. But the reactions of the people to the militant activities have undergone many phases of change; the ideological poverty of their struggle was soon evident in the dominance of the armed wing (Misra 214) and its gradual distance from the Assamese civil society increased by the repeated kidnappings, ransom collection and internecine killings that wing carried on.

Benedict Anderson's definition of nation as an imagined, political community that envisions a comradeship despite differences can be evinced to begin with also in ULFA's brand of nationalism that was looking for this very comradeship among people that it considered uniform in language and culture. Also, the idea that "nationness" is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time and that each successful revolution since World War II has defined itself successfully in "national" terms, is rooted spatially and temporally in the ULFA ideology. Naturally the movements which it carried on may also be considered sub-nationalist struggling to shed their 'sub-ness' someday,

as it were. This agenda inspires the militant outfit to create the necessary the nationalistic fervor – comradeship with fellow members for instance – despite differences within them as a people. This sense of community has enabled people across generations “not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (Anderson 7). ULFA’s attacks on people and their deaths in encounters thus were the results of the consolidation of nationalism that almost verged on cruel jingoism. However, sub-nationalist demands in Assam did not arise in Anderson’s homogeneous idea of time, but was rather born in the interstices – where neither the state government nor the centre was able to fulfill their demands. The disillusionment associated with the “revolution” did not come until much later, when the state government also failed to cater to all of the nationalists’ demands.

The news of Moina *pehi*’s in-laws that froze everyone in the family by its menace is alluded to from the beginning and revealed only towards the end. The entirety of the novel draws subtle references to this climax, almost building up to its sinister effects; in fact, it would have a lot to do with the terror of military control that people spent their lives in. In the decrepit, decaying family house at Mayong, Pablo experiences events that change his perception of life forever and also aid his growth. His romantic stint with Anamika and also Proshanto-*da*’s wedding to a divorced woman Onulupa are subplots in the text. Pablo’s comment on the gradually crumbling corners of the house seems to draw a parallel to the condition of Assam during the time – what was once beautiful and pristine is now punctured and infirm from within. The social fabric of Assam at this time is rent apart not only by violence but also superstitions, poverty and bigotry. Even at this point, people were not sure about the final consequences that nationalist struggle would lead to, but they hoped that it would lead to something. He remembers the discussion between his father and his first cousin Bolen-*bortta* about the expensive car of Hiren, a SULFA member. SULFA in Assam were ex-ULFA militants who surrendered arms and went back to the ‘mainstream’, as it were. ULFA or the United Liberation Front of Assam demanded freedom from what they called Indian imperialism; while ULFA struggled with fever, jaundice, malaria and malnutrition, SULFA openly roamed about with arms and were close to politicians. Pablo mentions that ULFA was frequently mentioned in local newspapers and journals, and their respect towards women and initiatives at educating poor students of Assam were given due respect – indicating perhaps that the ideology of ULFA militants still had a considerable support base in Assam. “Asomiya Swaraj” which was different from “Bharatiya Swaraj” even in pre-independence times continued to be regarded separately and was strengthened by contemporary writings in favour of nationalist ideology.

The problems began to arise after dreams and sentiments of a thriving and developed Assam were capitalized by nationalist groups who began to adopt violence to achieve their goal. Some other militant organizations, National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), Karbi Longri NC Hills Liberation Front, Dima Haram Daoga (DHD) grew in Assam along with other Northeastern states. The spirit of independence was always prevalent in Assam and originated possibly in the 600-year-old independent Ahom regime in Assam. Udayon Misra mentions that ULFA’s struggle for an independent Assam was a part of the “Assamese middle class’ quest for a homogeneous homeland” (156). Pablo’s father tells his mother that she would never be able to ‘understand’ why educated young people deserted their families, homes and careers to join the cause of overthrowing Indian rule in Assam. However, although ULFA attracted young men and women and garnered support from almost all sections of the society, they failed to “create a common united

national platform" for the people of Assam. One of the principal reasons for this would be the Assamese perception of their national identity being limited only to the question of language which overpowered the cause eventually (Misra 157). This rather one dimensional quest for achieving linguistic dominance came into conflict with the ever-expanding poly-ethnic and heterogeneous socio-cultural base of Assamese society. Thus, for their own purposes, Assamese nationalism now included not only Assamese speaking people but also sections of tribal populations and immigrant Muslims. These immigrant Muslims, called "Na-Asamiyas" or the "new Assamese" had chosen Assamese as their mother tongue for political reasons or otherwise, which gave the Assamese nationalists a renewed hope at reviving their culture, language and heritage. Even before Partition, there was a "deep-seated dislike" (172) for the Bengali Hindu who were considered the biggest impediment to the creation of a linguistically and socially homogeneous Assamese land. However, Assam had participated actively in the Freedom Struggle, voicing at the same time an unequivocal demand to stay out of the Cabinet Mission's grouping plan. Following this, the secession of Sylhet, a pre-dominantly Bengali speaking province from Assam made the demands for homogeneity stronger. But, in Post-Partition India, unabated migration in addition to the growing hiatus between the state and the Centre with regard to political and economic questions, concerning revenue earned from tea and oil infuriated nationalist sections of the population. Very soon, insurgent nationalism opposed the state leadership too. Given this situation, the choice for people was difficult – they hoped for a prosperous Assam but were generally perplexed by the demand for secession.

To add to this, the violent means adopted by militant groups now created unrest both at the political level and in the minds of the common people. The demands for sovereignty within the political control of the nation-state began to be equated to a breach of law and order, to curb which the Centre imposed the control of army. Its direct effects were on common people for whom, the presence of the army in the vicinity seems to have become a constant. The army could harass and arrest young men without reason, and this is also something that Pablo's mother cautions him against, when he decides to go to Mayong to attend the wedding.

When Pablo and his cousin Mridul journey towards Mayong, they are stopped midway by an Assam *bandh*. It was common for militant nationalist organizations in Assam to call strikes and shutdowns in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as it was usual for people to follow these complete shutdowns, because no one wanted their shops and restaurants burnt down. Common people in Assam had found ways to deal with the onslaught of violence – some even celebrated these days of closure with "chicken curry and Hindi films and drinks" (Kashyap 35). That army personnel frequently patrolled villages and towns seemed to turn into an everyday occurrence; Pablo's narration brings to light this subtle contradiction of fact and fiction. It wouldn't, after all, take a lot for the army to shoot down innocent people at sight, or carry out fake encounters, to "plant grenades or an AK-47 beside it and call the press" (37), just to prove that they had gunned down an insurgent. References to the inhumane activities of the army, mostly encounter killings are drawn in various other works too. The figure of encounter killings in Assam in 2011-12 crossed that of even Kashmir or Manipur and was recorded at 87, which steadily rose from 31 deaths in 2009-10 to 54 in 2010-11 (Misra 159). Sanjoy Hazarika recounts an incident in a household in Assam where a beloved son was picked up, beaten and thrown into an army truck while everyone watched in horror. "That nightmare", Hazarika writes, "in many parts of the state lasted much of the 1990s but, even today, sometimes, victims wake in fear" (Hazarika 128).

Pablo describes poignantly a similar scene witnessed by him in Mayong which stayed with him for many days afterwards. This image would also be representative of the terror that people lived through every day in Mayong. While Pablo and Mridul take a walk in the village they come across a lamppost which Mridul cautiously avoids. On being asked why he did so, Mridul is initially reluctant to answer but gradually Pablo comes to know that a brother of an ULFA militant was killed and hanged over the pole about three months back. His legs and fingers had been chopped off and his face was twisted. He had been butchered because his brother had refused to take the government's money to set up his business and return to society. The horror in the incident stays in the minds of all the people in Mayong, yet the sheer reluctance to mention and the silence accompanying it explains the tremendous impact it bore on them. This had clearly been carried out as part of the encounter by Indian army, thus concentrating on the very important dichotomy – while ULFA had engaged in killings and collection of ransom for the progress of their land and people, there was no reason for innocent people to be killed in retaliation in such a merciless manner. The role of the Centre was questioned. The killers consisted of not only army personnel but also SULFA members.

Pablo notices that there are more army men than local youth all about Mayong which shows that people had internalized the fear and preferred to stay indoors, to avoid being interrogated by the army. The army keeps people entangled in a panopticon, as it were, simply staring and casting “raven-mean glances” at them, doing nothing. Hiren Das, the surrendered ULFA militant and his family are killed by unknown people. Brikodar, a friend of Mridul's is a Karbi young man living in the same village. His sister, Mamoni is a cheerful young girl, attending to her brother's friends sincerely, when Pablo sees her first in 1998. The same girl in the year 2002 is drastically changed and her easy, carefree self vanishes. Pablo later comes to know that she had been raped and tortured by army men when she had gone to bathe in the river for no fault of her own. She permanently loses her sanity by this. When Pablo visits their house, he is interrogated on the way by the army who are prone to questioning any gathering that they witness. After the army men leave, Mamoni shrieks out loud and soils herself, an impression which Pablo would never forget for years to come. It is the ambience of violence and alarm perpetrated by both the army and the militants that terrorizes the people, and although militants are armed with weapons, it is the army that people are more afraid of. The turmoil experienced by people in these years due to conflict of insurgents and the Centre perhaps made them desire peace more dearly than anything else.

Pablo's Moina *pehi* comes to know that one of the groom's brothers is a “terrorist” who shelters himself at her in-laws' house. This piece of information which shocks everyone is the news that has been indicated at from the beginning. The faceless terror of army raids turns into a tangible reality, in which women and girls recount with horror the effects of army operation on other people of the locality. The terror makes everyone believe the rumours and be cautious of army raids and operations that would follow soon after – as they curse their luck for the misfortune, which invariably spoils the mood of the wedding. Moina *pehi* had attempted suicide twice, just to escape police raids and armed atrocities. Finally she died in her husband's home on the day just after the wedding and the family was cruelly affected by it. It was an irreparable loss for the family, serving as a topic of gossip. People hoped that one day, conflict and unrest carried out by ULFA, SULFA, Bodo or Karbi rebels would vanish from Assam but they did not know how many families they would lose in the process. It was difficult to say



how many women the army would strip during search raids, during secret killing operations by masked gunmen who shot mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, uncles of ULFA members who had not surrendered before that blessed day arrived. (Kashyap 211)

The problem between the two parties worsened too by the Centre's imposition of pan-Indianism over regional patriotism(s). Both government officials and nationalist parties argued that the Centre has always been unsympathetic to the issues of the Northeast. Thus, trying to suppress movements with strong historical roots, as in this case has led to India's "Northeast Experience" (Misra vii). Even after 70 years of India's independence, the history of India's Northeast is inextricably related to the Partition and the string of migrations that accompanied it. The crisis of borders and the term 'foreigner' are contentious in Assam and may be understood as the principal cause of contemporary citizenship debates. Immigration into Assam became even more complicated with the demarcation of an international border between East Pakistan/Bangladesh and Assam. The common Assamese perception was that they would turn into minorities if more 'foreigners' seeped into Assam from Bangladesh and caused a demographic imbalance. The Assam Agitation (1979 – 85) and its agitators and subsequently ULFA complained against illegal migration and enfranchisement of non-citizens. That the two communities were essentially different made any possibility of amalgamation a far-fetched one – a crisis that the Centre has not tried to consider. Yet, there are many people in the state with a hybrid identity – at once, dual and mixed, as Nandana Dutta mentions, which are situated at a juncture, unable to take sides but dreaming and hoping for a prosperous land all the same. There seems to be a consensus about the fact that the main cause of problems for Northeast India is migration. The phenomenon of migration led to the creation of these hybrid identities which found it difficult to place themselves and if they could at all find their "location" per se, they could not support the violence that ULFA engaged in. The conflict, as Dutta writes, was between the self and the other, the host and the migrant – as violence infected this space 'in-between'. In the practices that emerged from the Assam Movement, the migrant ended up being whoever was different from the self. The crises of identity therefore poses a direct challenge to the demand for homogeneity which the comparative majority tries and imposes upon the others and which eventually leads to serious problems for social, economic and political spaces. Nandana Dutta also talks of her preference of English over Assamese or Bengali, because English in Assam is a language of anonymity. The constant grappling with identity becomes easier when one speaks and writes in English – the chances of being identified by language alone become much thinner. Thus, writing in English or at least, translating works into English has brought the issues of the margin to the centre and given the writers from Northeast India a voice that writes back to the centre, as it were and one which enables the rest of the mainland a glimpse into the Northeast.

To get back to the previous argument then, the response to violence has been read in two ways, which merged into each other as days progressed. The initial response of approving of ULFA and considering them as the moral police was gradually subsumed into one of indifference – in which the ULFA alienated and distanced itself more and more from the civil society of Assam by their violence. Over time, people have cherished peace more than their dreams of a 'Swadhin Asom' as ULFA lost to their inner conflicts and the consequent failure of their cause.

## II

When one talks of women as being doubly colonized and marginalized in Northeast India, one is obviously mentioning how women are affected additionally by militancy because of their gendered identity, besides facing postcolonial crisis immensely. Arupa Patangia Kalita, one of the most respected contemporary writers in Assam has always considered the position of the marginalized and downtrodden, especially women. Ranjita Biswas's translation of her short stories, *Written in Tears*, portrays this situation poignantly. The distinctive contradiction of supporting the ideology of militant nationalists but not their violence earned Kalita a lot hostility. She clarifies that she "couldn't accept the jingoism and chauvinism that accompanied that demand" (Biswas 215).

The protagonist in her first story, Arunima ("Arunima's Motherland") therefore, is such a character set at an objective distance from militancy and one who tries to be happy in her marital life. Like Pablo's Moina-pehi, one of her brothers-in-law is a member of ULFA. His is a spectral presence throughout the story – an absent signifier – unsettling the otherwise happy household of her in-laws who are all caring and loving to each other, tending plants and almost making up for the absence of their elders in their pretty gardens and the bees that swarm the trees. Arunima and her in-laws are stigmatized too, although they never sheltered their insurgent son. Yet his presence wreaks havoc on their lives, leading to questionings and harassment by the army. As she loses all her family in a blast, she is left wondering at the implausibility of ever having a home again. Thus her "motherland" remains a myth, as for most other common people and though she tries to stay away from violence, it proves to be an inevitable part of everyone's lives in Assam.

Arupa Patangia has been very vociferous in her stand against the violence and this is perhaps best encapsulated in her story, 'The Half-Burnt Bus at Midnight' as she writes – "The real danger is heralded by the ones with two legs. They could shoot down everyone in sight as if people were birds; they could put the houses on fire if they fancied" (Kalita 153). The bus in the story is the metaphorical representation of the nationalistic vehemence in the state and its consequences which carries its impacts everywhere it goes. Yet this bus was once fresh and unspoiled, as were the dreams of the people. But since it catches fire on its journey from a land that had literally returned to its horrific past, its remains were destroyed with not a single surviving passenger. The irony of the situation was such that the *bandh* called by people who "wanted to establish its right over others" (160) could not stop the bus from being saved, as people kept indoors in order to secure themselves from the violence. The story also mentions instances of violence – a young boy being abducted for ransom, bomb blasts here and there and then its effects which include temporary slowing down of lives of people, only to gear up a few days later.

The hopelessness of the situation gets clearly expressed in Kalita's writings as she writes in another of her stories "Face in the Mirror" that the condition of demanding separation was a self-destructive one, which was "devouring its own body" (131). People were made to pay ransom without understanding the cause or risk gunshots. These years of turmoil saw the growth of hatred in a random manner when innocuous common people were victimized again and again. Kalita had herself faced severe antagonism for not supporting the violence when the Northeast was under a period of severe strife and unrest. The narrator of this story reminisces how a revolutionary young man had darted into her bedroom many years ago demanding money and how on being refused, had reacted with anger and hatred. She has clarified that in spite of her support to the cause of

militants, that is, driving the illegal migrants away and demanding the land for themselves, she couldn't accept the xenophobia associated with the cause. This stand of hers is best explicated in "Surabhi Barua and the Rhythm of Hooves" which visualizes a young teacher at a college, much like Kalita herself – who is cornered and alienated for her divergent opinions on the reckless violence. The dire circumstances force her to escape surreptitiously from the town where she is working, hence the "rhythm of hooves" that take her far away from the town. Her engagement to her fiancé gets cancelled owing to the wrong impressions everyone has of her. One is made to question the idea of the nation and what it entails. This idea resonates with another one of Kalita's unforgettable characters – Zungmila, a Mizo girl in a boarding school ("Face in the Mirror"), who detests the idea of the Indian nation, since army activities at the behest of the Centre have destroyed the peace of their land, tortured and assaulted their women and never acknowledged the differences that they had with the rest of the country. Arupa Patangia Kalita also translated Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* into Assamese and a portion of the story (the tale of Black Cholly and Darlene) has been included in this collection of stories. This episode may be understood with reference to the attacks on the innocent and helpless people across countries. Kalita makes a very important intervention in that she exposes the fact that the common people are victimized for no fault of their own but because, as it were, they are witnesses to the impotence of perpetrators of violence. Just as Black Cholly did not have the capacity to hate white men and so he hated the girl, insurgents too kill common men since their hatred does not find proper expression and because they are unable to oppose the army.

Ayengla is a simple hill woman in "Ayengla of the Blue Hills". She is happy and content in her tiny family, but can never understand why people in the surrounding regions are so engaged in creating a separate land for themselves. But when one of these men turns up at her doorstep demanding food, she cannot refuse him. She continues to supply food to him quietly. The army men raid Ayengla's home in search of the '*deshlaga dushman*' – the enemies of the nation but cannot find any. The jawans set fire to huge areas of agricultural produce to stop either the village men or separatists from reaping the benefits of the produce. Indeed, the villagers become the symbolic blade of grass between two warring buffaloes, between the '*deshlaga dushman*' and '*basti laga*'. Like Brikodar's sister Mamoni, one day Ayengla is raped by the army beside the brook although there is really no reason for it. Ayengla is muted into numbness, only reacting, crying and gnashing her teeth, when she is taken for a bath at the brook. The responses to such armed atrocities are therefore copious and at the same time, extremely complex and distressing.

Arupa Patangia Kalita and Aruni Kashyap, as well as other authors of Northeast India – Jahnvi Barua, Mitra Phukan, Dhruba Hazarika, Tamsula Ao, Easterine Kire – who incidentally write in English, are discerning witnesses to the disturbing unrest in the region, which has gone through years of unmitigated conflict born out of demands for separatism and the refusal to blend with the "mainland". The failure to accomplish their demands in the face of armed repression perhaps gave the insurgents the frustration which took away a lot more than it had initially bargained for, and therefore, this has affected the private and public lives of people in the society through these years. These writings give us the much-needed perspective on the English writings from India's Northeast which had remained an enigma to many. They help to contextualize and draw into theoretical focus much of the post- and trans-national issues that still plague one of the vast uncharted regions of postcolonial India.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

### About the Guest Editor

**Arunima Ray** is the Guest Editor of this Special Issue on Indian Writing in English. She teaches English at Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi. Her special areas of interest are Postcolonial Studies, Feminist Studies, Dalit Literature, Indian Writing in English, and so on. She has widely published in these areas, presented papers in national and international seminars and is working on several ongoing projects at present.

### About the Authors

**Abantika Devray** completed her M.A and M.Phil in English from Jadavpur University, Kolkata and is currently pursuing PhD at the Department of English, Assam University, Silchar, on the representation of nationalism and conflict in contemporary works of fiction in Assam. She also teaches English on part-time basis at Scottish Church College, Kolkata.

**Amrita Chakraborti** is engaged in working on her Ph.D thesis at the Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Her areas of interest are Virginia Woolf, sapphic modernities, feminism, and queer studies.

**Anil Kumar Aneja** is a Professor at the Department of English, University of Delhi. His areas of interest are Disability Studies with particular reference to literature and cinema, Indian Writing in English and Human Rights Literature.

**Anjana Neira Dev** is Associate Professor of English at Gargi College, University of Delhi. Her research interests include Indian Writing in English, Popular Literature (Detective Fiction), Women's Writing, Creative Writing, and English for Special Purposes. She has published extensively in national and international journals and contributed articles to books in these areas. Her published books include four textbooks commissioned by the University of Delhi: an edited bilingual anthology on *Indian Literature: An Introduction* (2005), *Business English* (2008), *Creative Writing: A Beginner's Manual* (2009), and an edited *Anthology of Indian English Poetry and Short Stories* (2014). Anjana did her MPhil from the University of Cambridge and her PhD in Indian English Poetry from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Delhi. Her PhD dissertation titled *Nations Within and Without: A Study of Seven Post Independence Indian English Poets*, has since been published (2012). She has also co-authored a book on *Technical Writing and Communication: Theory and Practice* (2012), and edited *A Handbook for Academic Writing and Composition* (2014) and most recently, *A Critical Reader for Literary Theory* (2017). In January 2017 she was awarded a Major Grant in Aid for a project on "The Ganga in Indian Literature and Folklore" by the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR).

**Anne Jones** is a graduate student doing an M.A. in English and a Research Assistant at Villanova University, Pennsylvania, USA. Her essay "Tracing the Missing Letter: Reassembling Nonhuman Agency in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*" was published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Concept*. She was also recently awarded Villanova's \$3000 Summer Research Grant to explore how the spinning wheel, galvanized by Gandhi's

Hind Swaraj, functioned as a social actor that played a crucial role in unraveling the imperial network, and she was invited to present her findings at Villanova's Graduate Research Symposium earlier this year.

**Arti Minocha** is currently an Associate Professor at the Department of English, Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University. She has taught various courses in Indian Literature, Modern British Literature, World Literatures, and Women's Writing. Her doctoral project on gender and print cultures of colonial Punjab sought to re-inscribe women into histories of print and literary cultures and language debates in nineteenth century Punjab. She has worked extensively on archival collections housed in India and the United Kingdom, some of which she is currently translating. She has published in the areas of Indian Theatre, Print Culture Studies, and Gendered Histories of Colonial Punjab.

**Benil Biswas** is a performer, scholar and cultural commentator. Currently, he is an Assistant Professor, School of Cultural and Creative Expressions, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University, Delhi. He is trained in Theatre and Performance Studies at the School of Arts and Aesthetics (SAA), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. His research interest includes performance theory, aesthetics from minoritarian perspective, specially caste. His Ph.D thesis is "Towards an Alternative Aesthetics in Performative Traditions of the Namasudra." Recently, in 2016, he attended the Mellon School of Theater and Performance Research, Harvard University, Massachusetts, USA.

**Arpita Sardar** is a Ph.D. research scholar at the Jadavpur University, Kolkata Department of English. She has qualified UGC NET-JRF in English. She has done her Master's degree from Calcutta University, Department of English. Her areas of interest are Postmodern British Literature, Postcolonial Literature, Gender Studies, American Literature, and Australian Aboriginal Literature. She has publications in literary journals on the area of postcolonial Literature. She is currently working on the novels of Githa Hariharan.

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**Jasbir Jain** is Director of the Institute for Research in Interdisciplinary Studies (IRIS), Jaipur. Formerly of the University of Rajasthan, she has headed the Department of English and has worked in various capacities including the directorship of the Academic Staff College. Amongst her recent publications are *Indigenous Roots of Feminism* (2011), *Theorising Resistance* (2012), *The Diaspora Writes Home* (2015), *Forgiveness: Between Memory and History* (2016), *Subcontinental Histories: Literary Reflections on the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (2018) and *Interpreting Cinema: Adaptations, Intertextualities, Art Movements* (2020). Currently she is working on Multiple Modernisms.

**Muhammad Manzur Alam** is a Ph.D. candidate in English at West Virginia University, USA and is also an Assistant Professor (on leave) at East West University, Bangladesh. His research focuses on exploring issues of political ecology in South Asian novels. He has made conference presentations and publications on areas such as South Asian literature, political discourses, ecocriticism, and the Indo-Caribbean writer V.S. Naipaul.

**Musarrat Shameem** is an Associate Professor of English at Jagannath University, Dhaka. She completed her Honours and Master's in English Literature from the department of

English, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2000 and 2002 respectively. She had been teaching in different private universities in Dhaka before joining Jagannath University, a public university in 2010. She is now teaching there as a full time faculty member. She completed her doctoral research on Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri under the supervision of Fakrul Alam, PhD, UGC Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka. The title of her doctoral dissertation is *Plurality Redefined: The Emergence of the New Woman in Mukherjee, Divakaruni, and Lahiri*.

**Nupur Chawla** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Maitreyi College, Delhi University. Her research focuses on literary representations of conflict in Nagaland and their contention against coercive forces, stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding the region. She has presented papers in both national and international conferences and have also published a few of them in research journals. Additionally, she has authored resource material on Twentieth Century American poetry, for students of English Literature, at IGNOU, Delhi. Her association with The Consortium of Educational Communication, (CEC-UGC), Delhi, has involved recording lectures on various topics pertaining to English Literature. In her teaching tenure so far, she has taught papers on world Literatures, Indian Writing in English, Literature of Diaspora and Literature and Cinema. She completed BA (H) English and MA English from Delhi University and M. Phil from the Department of English, Jamia Milia Islamia, Delhi. Her M.Phil dissertation is titled “Politics and Aesthetic of Conflict in the Literary Space: A Study of Temsula Ao’s Short Fiction”.

**Poonam Sharma** pursued BA and MA in English Literature from Gargi College, University of Delhi. She did an MPhil in Modern South Asian Studies from the University of Cambridge and was awarded a Commonwealth Shared Scholarship for her course. Her MPhil dissertation focused on the Indian English novels after economic liberalization in India. Her fields of interest include postcolonialism and globalisation, Indian English fiction, Comparative Indian literature, Translation studies, Hindi novel and modern poetry. She is currently teaching as an Assistant Professor at the department of English, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi.

**Pramila Venkateswaran**, poet laureate of Suffolk County, Long Island (2013-15) and co-director of Matwaala: South Asian Diaspora Poetry Festival, is the author of *Thirtha* (Yuganta Press, 2002) *Behind Dark Waters* (Plain View Press, 2008), *Draw Me Inmost* (Stockport Flats, 2009), *Trace* (Finishing Line Press, 2011), *Thirteen Days to Let Go* (Aldrich Press, 2015), *Slow Ripening* (Local Gems, 2016), and *The Singer of Alleppey* (Shanti Arts, 2018). She has performed the poetry internationally, including at the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival and the Festival Internacional De Poesia De Granada. An award winning poet, she teaches English and Women’s Studies at Nassau Community College, New York. Author of numerous essays on poetics as well as creative non-fiction, she is also the 2011 Walt Whitman Birthplace Association Long Island Poet of the Year. She is a founding member of Women Included, a transnational feminist association.

**Pujarinee Mitra** has graduated with an MA in English from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in Spring 2020. Her thesis was on the use of personal documents by three women characters in Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* to record affects and function as a tool of anti-fascist resistance. A section of this thesis has been published in this issue. The questions that inform her research are: What is the function of affect within anti-fascist feminist resistance in India? How is this function represented in Anglophone literature from India and Bollywood films? She has presented in

conferences like the MLA, MMLA, Annual Conference of South Asia, Madison, and NeMLA. She has recently published an article, "The Vande Bharat Scam: Women, Social Standing, and Evacuation Flights to India under Covid-19" in *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, Vol. 44, Issue 1, Spring 2021. Her areas of interest include Contemporary South Asian Literature, Gender and Sexuality, Anti-fascism in South Asia, Affect Theory, and Postcolonial Literature.

**Raj Kumar** is Professor and Head in the Department of English, Delhi University. His research areas include autobiographical studies, Dalit literature, Indian writing in English, Odia literature and post-colonial studies. He has been a Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla in 1999 and has published in several journals such as *Social Action*, *Sateertha Bulletin*, *The Fourth World*, *Creative Forum*, etc. He has also translated literary texts from Indian languages, especially Odia into English. His book, *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity* has been published by Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi in 2010 and got reprinted in 2011, 2015 and 2017. His English translation of Akhila Naik's *Bheda*, the first Odia Dalit novel is published by Oxford University Press, Delhi in 2017. His book *Dalit Literature and Criticism* is published by Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi in 2019.

**Rita Joshi** is an Associate Professor of English at Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University. Her PhD. is on D. H. Lawrence. Her papers on D.H. Lawrence and Indian Fiction in English have been published in journals and edited volumes in India and also in the US.

**Sabreen Ahmed** has received her PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi in Feb 2013. Her thesis is entitled "Muffled Voices: The Zenana in the Fiction of Muslim Women Writers from South Asia." Her area of interest is Gender studies, South Asian English Writing and Contemporary Theory. She has published an anthology of poems entitled *Soliloquies* (2016) and has also edited a UGC Sponsored National Seminar Proceeding captioned *Indian Fiction in English and the Northeast* (2016). Currently she teaches in the Dept of English, Nowgong College, Nagaon, Assam. Her forthcoming book is *Interface: Language, Ecology and Gender in North East India*.

**Soumyadeep Neogi** is currently an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi. After completing his M.Phil from the University of Calcutta, he became engaged as a Senior Research Fellow at the Department of English, University of Delhi, where he is presently pursuing his Ph.D. His broader research interests include Partition and South Asian Cultural Studies.

**Swagata Bhattacharya** is a Postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University. Her doctoral thesis was on the representation of female characters by women writers of Indian origin in Canada. She is the author of the book *Diasporic Interventions: A Study on Select Women Writers of Indian Diaspora in Canada* (2016).

**Usha Akella** has authored six books that include poetry and musical dramas. Her newest book, *I will not bear you sons* is published by Spinifex Press, Australia in 2021. She earned an MSt in Creative Writing from the University of Cambridge, UK. She is the founder of Matwaala, first South Asian Diaspora Poets Festival in the US ([www.matwaala.com](http://www.matwaala.com)) and hosts interviews and conversations.

**Watitula Longkumer** is an Assistant Professor of English at IITRAM Ahmedabad. Her teaching and research interests include Indigenous literatures, Indigenous theory, North-East India Literature, Contemporary Indigenous Feminisms and related Indigenous women's history and literature, The Literary and the Digital Humanities.



## JOURNALS RECEIVED

*British Journal of Aesthetics, Comparative Literature, New Literary History, Poetics Today, Philosophy and Literature, Critical Inquiry, Journal of Modern Literature, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism.*

The *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* [ISSN 0252-8169] is a quarterly peer-reviewed academic journal published by Vishvanatha Kaviraja Institute, India since 1977. (Vishvanatha Kaviraja, most widely known for his masterpiece in aesthetics, *Sahityadarpana* or the "Mirror of Composition", was a prolific 14th-century Indian poet, scholar, and rhetorician.) The Institute was founded by Prof. Ananta Charan Sukla (1942-2020) on 22 August 1977 coinciding with the birth centenary of renowned philosopher, aesthetician, and art historian, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) to promote interdisciplinary studies in comparative literature, cultural theory, aesthetics, philosophy and criticism of the arts, religion, mythology, and history of ideas.

The Journal is committed to comparative and cross-cultural issues in literary understanding and interpretation, aesthetic theories, conceptual analysis of art, literature, philosophy, history, religion, and mythology. It also publishes special issues on critical theories of current interest and contemporary relevance. It is the oldest academic journal of India still in existence sans any institutional support.

JCLA has published the finest of essays by authors of global renown like René Wellek, Harold Osborne, John Hoppers, John Fisher, Murray Krieger, Trevor Ling, Martin Bucco, Remo Ceserani, J.B. Vickery, Menachem Brinker, Milton Snoeyenbos, Mary Wiseman, Ronald Roblin, T.R. Martland, S.C. Sengupta, V.K. Chari, Gordon Epperson, Judith Lochhead, Charles Altieri, Martin Jay, Jonathan Culler, Richard Shusterman, Robert Kraut, T.J. Diffey, T.R. Quigley, R.B. Palmer, Keith Keating, and many others.

JCLA is indexed and abstracted in the MLA International Bibliography, Master List of Periodicals (USA), Ulrich's Directory of Periodicals, ERIH PLUS, The Philosopher's Index, Philosophy Documentation Center (PDC), WorldCat Directory, EBSCO, ProQuest, Literature Online, Gale (Cengage Learning), United States Library of Congress, and the British Library. It is also indexed in numerous university (central) libraries, state and public libraries, and scholarly organizations/ learned societies databases.

Celebrated scholars of the time like René Wellek, Harold Osborne, Mircea Eliade, Monroe Beardsley, John Hoppers, John Fisher, M.H. Abrams, John Boulton, and many Indian and Western scholars had been members of its Editorial Board.

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